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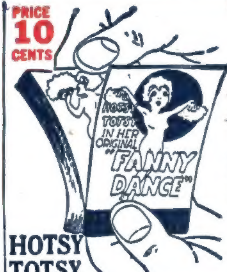

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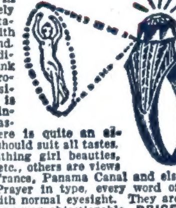

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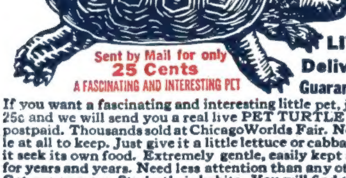

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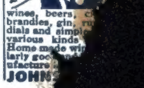

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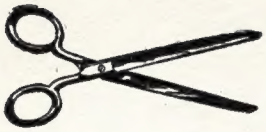

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THE GHOST RIDER OF RED ROCK.....**Hapsburg Liebe** 58
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THE GUN SLINGER FROM SUNDOWN.....**Jackson Cole** 97
Follow a Fast-Shooting Waddy of the Cowtowns as He Swaps Lead with an Ornery Outfit of Rustlers

THRILLING SHORT STORIES

BUCKAROO DEPUTY.....**Chuck Martin** 46
Top-Hand Thompson Barges in to Loot the Cowboys' Reunion

THE WILD MAN OF CANYON LOBO.....**Ray Nafziger** 74
The Hooker Brothers Meet Up with Archy-Ologers

TRAILS APART.....**Stephen Payne** 87
Bill Grabow Was Due to Stretch Rope—But . . .

HORSE SENSE.....**Earl C. McCain** 110
Sheriff Bradford on the Trail of the Chalk Cliffs Gang

SPECIAL WESTERN FEATURES

RUSTLERS' ROOST.....**A Story in Pictures** 55
Follow the Exciting Adventures of Six-Gun Sandy

HORSE-BACK RIDING MADE EASY.....**Col. Jno. J. Boniface** 84
This Month We Discuss the Art of Jumping

THE HITCHING RAIL.....**Buck Benson** 120
Where Readers Get Together. Swap Column, Page 123

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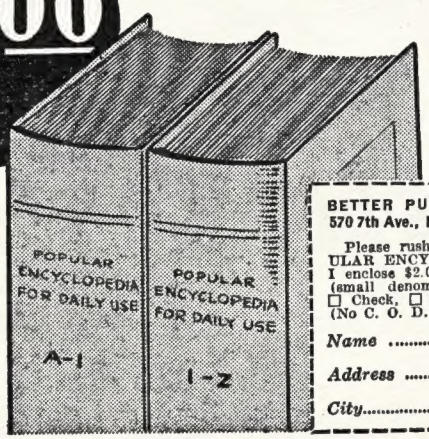

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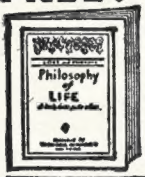

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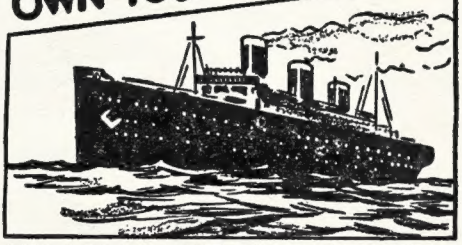

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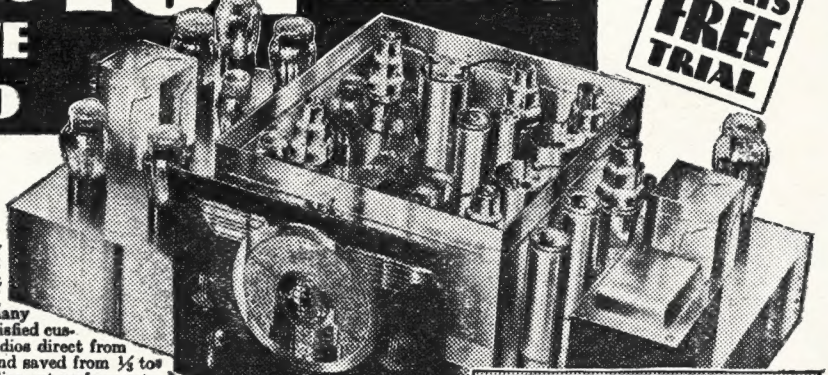

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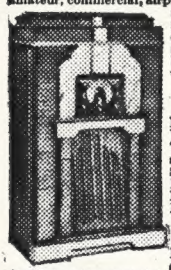

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CHAPTER I

Set-up in the "Aces Up"

GUN trouble seemed eternally to be camping on the trail of young Randy Coultras, cowpoke. He denied that he sought it, that he had any ambition to acquire the doubtful fame of being a trigger-finger artist; but he'd never sidestepped a fight yet and he carried scars as reminders of the battling streak in his nature.

As he strolled out on the inner

Pat Saginaw

gallery of the Aces Up Saloon and Dance Hall, stretching and yawning, Randy didn't look in the least prepared to take care of his end of a sudden gun scrap. But despite the fact he'd been up all night, trying to crack the poker luck—real or manufactured—of an Aces Up professional cardman, Randy Coultras wasn't so tired and sleepy that trouble could catch him balanced off center.

High-pocketed and loose-jointed, with the long face and gray eyes of the fighting man, he looked like a gun-handy boy it wouldn't do to fool around.

Roll-brimmed Stetson pushed over one ear, he reached the gallery railing and gazed below. Almost instantly all trace of sluggishness vanished, leaving him strung and taut. It was only ten o'clock, early in the morning for riders from the outlying cow country to be patronizing the bar, yet Randy saw no fewer than seven alkali-whitened figures on the floor beneath. The trail dust indicated they hadn't been long out of the saddle.

Four stood at the bar, three with their backs to it, elbows resting on the edge. The other man stood sidewise, raising a drink to mustached lips, but he could see the batwing doors out of the corner of his eye and seemed to be watching them steadfastly, just as were the three who squarely faced the saloon front.

But what had cinched Randy's distrust of the situation on the floor below were the give-away attitudes of the remaining three of the trail-marked party. On either side of the door and back five paces from it, stood a man with gun-hand hovering in the region of tied-down holster. The third fellow, tensed like a professional gunnie for trigger-slamming action, held the middle of the floor between the other two.

If those men weren't all set to drill hell out of someone who was expected to flap the wing doors presently, Randy didn't want a cent!

At a step behind him on the gallery, Randy wheeled. It was the slick-haired gambler, Barton, with his cards and chips, plus the wages Randy had got riding spring roundup a hundred miles north.

"Tiptoe, Barton," hissed Randy, crooking a finger. And as the cardman cautiously gained his side, the cowhand pointed. "Down there—what's that set-up for?"

BARTON'S eyes flicked rapidly over the group. He drew the cowboy back from the railing.

"You're a stranger here in Barranca or you'd understand," he whispered. "Notice the fellow with the Mex hat? He's Manuel Ortega, owner of the big Spanish grant twenty miles south. Don't you remember me sayin' last night how him and Pat Saginaw, fellow that owns a ranch near the grant, had got to fightin' each other over a big water-hole they both used when they were friends? The water-hole is really on the grant, and—"

"Ortega fences it, and Saginaw keeps cuttin' it down, to let his stock drink," Coultras finished for Barton. "Yeah, I remember now. Well, it sure looks like Ortega and his gunnies are waitin' to smoke Pat when he hits that door. Somebody oughta slide out and warn Saginaw. He wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance, steppin' in from the street glare."

He moved softly toward the railing, Barton at heel. The latter whispered: "I'll tell you what Pat looks like—"

He paused, sucked in his breath at the sound of hoofbeats in the street, two or three horses traveling together. The horses halted outside the Aces Up, and men's voices could be plainly heard. Although Barton muttered shakily, "Saginaw!" Coultras would have known the marked man had arrived from observing the increased tension of the sinister group under his gaze.

The man with the bullion-trimmed Chihuahua hat had put down his glass, turned his back on the bartender. But he did not touch hand to the gun on his leg. Apparently Ortega was content to leave the actual killing of Pat Saginaw to his hirelings.

BEFORE the startled eyes of Barton, Randy Coultras made lightning motions with each hand simultaneously. He'd plucked his guns so smoothly from low-hung sheaths, that all the gambler saw was a blurred movement, ending with gleam of blued steel as the cowboy bellied the railing, dipped muzzles at the unsuspecting men below. The batwing doors had started to swing inward when the lanky cowpuncher's resonant yell echoed through the barnlike place: "Hey, you gun-chuckers! Look up here—damn' *pronto!*"

He got the immediate attention of Ortega and his men, plus the white-faced bartender. With nerves strained from concentrating in the opposite direction, they were startled, one and all, by this threatening hail from the rear.

Randy Coultras

Swarthy faces beneath J. B. brims betokened that there were two Mexicans besides Ortega himself; the others were American cowboy pistoleers. None knew the gun-pointing man on the gallery, but his intentions were obvious—he was intervening in the well-planned massacre of Pat Saginaw.

Randy Coultras gave them first shot. It was one of the Mexicans close to the door who fired, and the bullet ripped a chunk out of the railtop, inches from the cowboy's hip. Randy rocked his right-hand Colt hammer and the swart gunman stiffened on his toes, crashed forward with a red trickle creeping from beneath his still body.

The men at the bar, Ortega leading, moved swiftly, concertedly toward the barroom's middle, the better to line gunsights on their enemy above. The railing was splintered in half a dozen places as slugs snarled around the smoke-eating

Manuel Ortega

Randy. One bullet slapped his hat brim, knocking it more askew than ever, and whistled on to plunk in the wood behind him. Barton, he saw, was crawling on hands and knees away from the zone of fire.

Randy let drive at the head of a nimble-triggering cowhand who was getting his range too close for the cowpoke's ease of mind. Blood was running down one side of Randy's face, where one of the quick-gun *hombre's* slugs had grazed.

Flame lashed from Randy's left hand smoke-iron. A hole appeared in the crown of the dodging gray Stetson below. The owner of that vented hat swooped to the floor, stayed there motionless, his outflung hand tilting up a smoking gun.

Shots roared from the front doorway, now deserted by Ortega's men. Without taking his eyes off the flame-throwing figures trying to cut him down, Randy Coultras was aware that Pat Saginaw and his companions had pushed into the saloon.

If Ortega and his crew—with two of them sprawled dead on the Aces Up floor—had momentarily forgotten the party for whom they were lying in wait, the guns of Pat Saginaw and the two men flanking him, flashing lethal lead, served as biting reminders.

Ortega had yanked his gun to fire at Coultras; but, suddenly nipped in the shoulder by a slug from Pat Saginaw's blazing weapon, the Mex cowman spun on clinking heels. Hate was in the black eyes which sought Pat's bulky form, and hate glared from Pat's blue eyes. Their six-shooters belched together.

Ortega's bullet bit into the batwing door, slamming it violently outward. At the moment of triggering, Pat, not looking where he stepped, stumbled against the lifeless gunman, throwing his aim off center.

Simultaneously, Ortega heard a sickening thud of flesh behind him as another of his men flattened, never to cramp trigger again. He must have realized, then, that to stand his ground meant the extermination of himself and gunnies, rather than the downfall of his cowman rival. This defeat—Manuel ground white teeth, cursed—was all owing to that trigger-twitching cowpoke on the gallery, whom Ortega didn't even know.

While Saginaw was recovering his balance, Ortega leaped agilely toward the nearest end of the bar, around it. His feet tracked in zigzags as he ducked low, for lead was buzzing over the bar-top. He shouted for his men to follow. They were only too willing, and sensed the line of flight Ortega had in mind.

THROUGH the saloon's rear door, Manuel Ortega led the stampede for the open and their horses, hitched half a block away. This precaution had been taken so that Saginaw wouldn't be on guard from observing mounts with the Triangle brand, Ortega's, standing before the saloon.

Randy Coultras was leaping down the stairs from the second-floor gallery, reloaded guns in his hands, as

the Saginaw party barged through the back door. The bartender was rising from his hiding place behind the mahogany, making a wry face as he glanced around the smoke-filled barroom, when Randy trailed by, heading for the same door used by pursued and pursuers.

"Nice li'l picnic while it lasted," Randy grinned at the barman.

"You saved Pat from gettin' hell in the neck," commented the drink dispenser. "He'll be your friend for life, cowboy. But Ortega, if he lives through it—"

Coultras was through the doorway and failed to catch what else the garrulous one said. He found himself on a narrow back street. Hurrying to a corner of the saloon and dance hall building, he saw Saginaw running on saddle-warped legs up the alley toward the main street.

Randy joined the two men with Saginaw on the plank sidewalk at the saloon front. They were gazing down street at the men piling frantically into saddles. No Colt gun would reach the saddle-forkers; Saginaw's pistol muzzle sagged toward the ground. His broad, beardless, sun-scoured face broke into an expansive smile. His belly shook with laughter under slanting gun belt.

"No chase after 'em, boys," he said. "We put the Injun sign on 'em and that's enough for now, seein' none of us is hurt."

HE suddenly sensed the presence of Randy Coultras and swung about, measuring the long, lanky fellow with a friendly eye. Randy knew that he was facing a real man, one of the old-time stock-raising breed, who had carried the law of six-gun and rope into the chaparral and wastelands when the West was younger. These two, old-timer and young-timer, looked at each other and friendship was born. It would have been that way, even if Pat

Sime Hardin

hadn't owed the younger man a debt of gratitude.

"You're the buckaroo't was makin' gun music on the gallery a bit ago?" Pat socked gun on holster. "While I dunno the facts of the case, I can guess 'em, knowin' how Ortega hates me, the saddle-colored houn'-dog! Waitin' to get me, with his gunnies spread around facin' the door, and you bought chips in the gun game just as we'uns was walkin' plumb innocent intuh the trap?"

"That's how it was," nodded Randy, revealing good teeth with his wide smile. "I didn't savvy the set-up till Barton, the gambler, came out of the room we'd been playin' in. He'd spoke of you before, how you and Ortega was sort of at war account of him bob-wirin' a waterhole to keep your cattle out."

Pat's leonine head bobbed, anger flamed in his eyes. "Yeah, once we was friends; but some time back my outfit began missin' calves, found mammy cows down in the scrub with knife-cut hoofs so's they couldn't foller rustled slick-ears, and the maverickers sure wasn't no other men but Ortega's. He denied it hard

as hell, uh course, and since then we got our fangs out for each other.

"Every time he's fenced that water-hole, I've cut it down. Only got two onreliable creeks on my range, and no damn' man is goin' to keep my cows from drinkin'. I'd go bust, mebbe, with that water-hole cut off permanent, and Manuel knows it.

"I've paid no end of fines for destroyin' his fences, but the money don't worry me. I own two-thirds of this town, besides my cow range. Was one of the first white men to settle hereabouts."

"Barton told me that, too," said Randy, building a quirley. "I'm some surprised Ortega would try to ambush a prominent citizen like you right here in town. 'Tain't like dry-gulchin' on the range."

"Manuel's gettin' pretty reckless in his hate of me, I'll allow," Saginaw grunted. "But I reckon if he'd won out today he'd 'a' claimed to the sheriff it was just a free-for-all, reg'lar battle, which we'uns happened to lose. And any chance witnesses would 'a' been careful not to know nothin' in that case, 'cause Ortega hires a unholy bunch of trigger-finger men.

"I ain't forgettin' you kept me and the boys here from hittin' the flume to hell! I take it you're a stranger and ridin' grub line? Not no more! From right damn' now you're a top-hand with my Forked Lightnin' outfit. What's the name, high pockets?"

CHAPTER II

Law of the Gun

RIDING the paint pony which he had forked into the New Mexican cow town of Barranca two nights previous, Randy Coultras, with cigarette pasted to lower lip, headed for the gallery of the Forked Lightning ranch house. It was mid-afternoon; he had ridden hard from the mountain-flanked range southeast of headquarters buildings, and he hoped to find Saginaw at home.

In the short time he had been with the Forked Lightning, Randy realized he had hooked up with a good outfit—the boss especially was an ace!

"HEY!" boomed Saginaw, from the window of the room he occupied as office. "Want to see me? Ridin' in early, ain'tcha?"

Randy replied, "You're just the man!" Saginaw waved him to a chair as he entered the office.

"A hen on with some of Ortega's gang, maybe?" the big rancher inquired, lolling back in his hide-bottomed chair as if such an announcement wouldn't worry him.

"No," the high-pocketed puncher said seriously. "I cut the trail of a survey outfit down below Soogan Creek. They're stakin' out right of way for a T. P. and A. spur-line, the rodman told me. I reckon you know about it, but you hadn't said nothin', and I wanted to be sure. Then tracks'll run right inside your east boundary—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," Saginaw tapped the cowboy's leather-clad knee. "It's all right, Randy. Sure I know about it and you would, too, if you'd lived at the Lightnin' for the last year and a half. If you'd happened to be ridin' with any of the boys, they'd 'a' told you.

"Them surveyors must've just started work today; the construction boss of the line was here to see me last week and he said it'd be soon."

"You don't mind havin' your range cut up thataway?"

"It wouldn't do me any good if I did mind, boy, for a railroad runs its lines accordin' to topography, and they'd condemn what land they wanted of mine same as they did

Randy cut loose with both hands, saw his target wilt

Ortega's. Happens, though, since the new road is goin' to push right up my range, 'cross Ortega's and stop at Barranca, I'm plumb glad to have it come. Ownin' as much of that town as I do, I figure on big profits from the boom that'll result."

"Old-timer," chuckled Randy, "I'm afraid you got notions of becomin' a bloated capitalist!"

Pat Saginaw scratched his white head, eyes twinkling. "And me without kith or kin to leave it to when I cash my checks. Boy, if I get into the big money, I'll use what I need, and the rest will go to help them as ain't so lucky. I'm first of all a cowman, and don'tcha figure I'll forgit the days when I had but ten critters, a horse and a patched-up riggin'."

Randy's eyes were glowing. "Damned if I don't believe you would do good with that dough, Pat." He had been told to call Saginaw that, not "boss." "About Ortega: you was sayin' he refused to sell any land to the railroad?"

"He sure did. That Spanish grant he inherited, first belonged to his great-great-grand'pop Ortega, who was a fightin' *hombre* I've heard tell, and Manuel takes after him. Reckon you know that at the time New Mexico become United States territory 'way back, the Mex landowners were

allowed to keep what they had by issue of a patent.

"Year and a half ago, when the agent for T. P. and A. come to see Manuel and me about sellin' land enough for right of way, Manuel goes hog-wild. He wanted to keep the tract like it always had been. I could get his viewpoint, all right, but I savvied he'd lose to the railroad in the end, and I tried to argue with him, friend to friend.

"But he had some bull-headed idea a railroad couldn't get ownership of any land in a Spanish grant, even through the courts. He hired a team of shyster lawyers, who must've seen he was a good sucker and they fought the condemnation proceedin's instituted by the T. P. and A.

"Uh course, the court's decision gave the railroad complete ownership of what land it needed to build on, at its own price. But Manuel ain't quit fightin', he say, and has let them lawyer sharks hoodle him intuh believin' there's still a chance of cuttin' the rails off by appealin' to a higher court. Always hot-headed, he's gone pretty near haywire on the railroad proposition and fightin' over the water-hole.

"You know," Saginaw discovered his pipe cold, paused to borrow a match from his new stock hand, "I figure that maverick makin' that broke up our friendship is the result of Manuel's fightin' the T. P. and A. He sold a lot of cattle to get more money to carry on the fight in court; and it's my opine, though not proved yet, that he started in stealin' from me to build up his cut-down herds. I want you to watch sharp, like I've told the rest of the boys, for any sign of rustlin'."

RANDY was listening, attentively, roll-brimmed sombrero perched on his knee. "Sure, Pat. Your idea is mighty reasonable."

"Now that Manuel and me ain't *amigos* no more, he'll be twice as locoed to stop the railroad, knowin' it will benefit me, his enemy. It would help him, too, specially at shippin' time, only he won't see that. If you're lookin' for excitement, Randy, you sure pegged saddle at the right ranch. We got a water war and railroad war combined, on our hands."

"Say, I wouldn't 'a' missed the fun—" Randy paused abruptly. He lunged from his chair and leaned out the office window. He thought he had heard rapid hoofbeats drumming up from the southeast, and he was right. He drew his head in.

"Somebody's poundin' hell-for-leather—more'n one horse. Hi, there goes a shootin' iron!"

Pat had risen, was belting on a six-shooter. He seized a Winchester carbine from a rack on the wall, handed it to Randy, and grabbed another for himself.

THEY hadn't much of an idea what form of trouble they were going to meet as they hit the gallery, ran toward the rear of the house. But immediately they perceived two horsemen tearing up the sun-baked level at whippet speed. One man was in pursuit of the other, with a 200-yard interval, pumping shots from a .44 Winchester.

The pursued man, hatless, leaning low on his horse's neck, was apparently unarmed, for he didn't throw a single shot back at the hard-paced trailer. That he was trying desperately to reach Forked Lightning headquarters was obvious.

"By dog, it's that engineer of the survey outfit, Bill Trimble," Pat exclaimed. "The one in front, I mean. Galoot behind is Utah Farlin, an Ortega killer who's got a rep smelly as a backfirin' skunk. What'n hell's up, anyway?"

Randy acted without wasting words. The gallery extended almost

to the back of the ranch house; he leaped the railing, Winchester in hand, and dashed across the yard toward the fence, spurs flashing in the sun.

Although Utah Farlin, his hat hanging to his neck by the rawhide chin thongs, had spotted Saginaw and Coultras on the ranch gallery, he did not check the head-on running of his horse nor cease his attempts to kill Trimble, the surveyor, before eyewitnesses.

The cowpuncher reached the fence, stopped and cuddled his cheek against the Winchester .30-30's brown stock. The range wasn't over 250 yards as he sighted on the galloping Utah. But the rack of the carbine failed to deter the pounding rider. He kept on coming, directing his bullets still at the back of Trimble. The engineer's horse faltered in its lunging stride, went down in a dusty flurry. Bill Trimble was hurled far to one side.

Randy fired again. The bullet must have buzzed fairly close, for Utah ducked his head and shouted, evidently cursing. His Winchester .44 pointed toward the man at the fence, but no flame jetted from the business end. He'd cracked the last shell in the magazine. Ortega's hireling leaned on the bridle, his horse squatted low and slid, raising a dust pall. Randy saw that the killer was in retreat, but he was shoving fresh shells through the Winchester's loading gate as he rode back.

RANDY hurled the fence, just as old Saginaw, white locks blowing back, came running up. The cowboy ran a few yards from the fence, knelt, threw carbine to shoulder. His trigger finger cramped as he lined up the sights, but he distinctly saw the alkali spurt off to one side of Utah Farlin's racing mount.

Missed by inches. Daggone! It was difficult to hit a flying rider at that distance, even from a ground rest.

Randy knew some of the Triangle gang must have murderously attacked the survey party. He was stubbornly determined Utah Farlin shouldn't have the chance to rejoin his outfit. He jerked his glance to the spot where Trimble and his horse had piled up. The horse was on its feet, apparently not much hurt, and Trimble had risen and was weaving toward the men by the fence.

"I'm notchin' that Utah buzzard!" Randy yelled over his shoulder, as Saginaw lowered his carbine and angrily watched the dust streaks of the retreating killer.

COULTRAS spurted, passed the lurching engineer. He slowed his gait as he neared the man's mount, flung astride. He headed on the trail of the outlaw, stepping up the pace from trot to gallop. His mount seemed willing, and able to stand another gruelling dash.

Utah Farlin screwed around in the leather as hoofs roared in his wake. He pitched the rifle up; lead began to sing around pursuing horse and rider. But the grim Coultras hammered straight on, reserving his own fire. He felt the bronc tiring under him; it had already run far and fast with Trimble. Only a game heart kept its hoofs moving.

Randy grimly watched the distance between him and his outlaw quarry lessening. Utah Farlin's dark, greasy-looking face, with unkempt hair stirred by the wind, showed anxiety. His horse, too was at the limit of speed and endurance. His slashing spurs couldn't induce another spurt. Suddenly with body twisted, Utah jumped the Winchester stock against his shoulder. Flame spit back at Randy. A hit! His horse nose-dived; he felt himself tearing through space over its head;

clutching his carbine, Coultras crashed on unyielding ground, with the killer's triumphant yell smiting his ears. But the shock of his landing kept him sprawled flat only a moment. He heaved upward on his knees, tucking up the carbine for a quick shot. Hundred and fifty yards, he reckoned. Easy!

UTAH leaned sidewise as the .30-30 gave voice; he tumbled headlong, arms flailing out, his feet clear of the stirrups. He gained his feet quickly, dragging up his rifle and snapping it forward. But no shot sounded across the leagues of gray-green sage and buffalo grass.

Evidently the killer was out of .44 shells, for he spun the rifle away, threw hands to gun-butts on his leather-cased legs and flung desperate about for some sort of shelter from the long-range fire of Randy's carbine. He knew Randy could pick him off without coming in range of Utah's six-shooters. There was no cover at hand; they were in the open plain.

Coultras wasn't of the breed to take unfair advantage. He let the Winchester slip from his grasp as he advanced stealthily toward the dazed outlaw. Utah Farlin batted his eyes, as if surprised, but did not move. He stood with fingers clawing his gun-grips.

"Get goin'!" Randy challenged. "One of us don't ride no more, Farlin!"

Utah came striding stiff-kneed to meet the cowpuncher. Tough enough when shooting at the unarmed Trimble, the killer knew Coultras was a cold-nerved gun-slick and he made each step forward only by power of will.

Neither spoke. There was no need of words. By the rules of frontier gunfighting, each was to shoot when ready, when the strain of watching the space between them diminish became unbearable. There was guile in Utah's dark eyes, which he couldn't hide from the frosty gray gaze of Randy. His opponent's eyes, the cowpoke knew from experience, would tell him the instant Utah intended thumbing his hammers.

That instant of warning came when they were separated by less than thirty yards. Utah's .45s lined up with a swift jerk; the muzzles flamed. But the cowboy's shooting-irons spat a watch-tick sooner, as his big thumbs rocked the hammers. He was shooting blood-oozing holes in Utah's rawhide anatomy, while the killer's bullets were harmlessly swiping Randy's clothes.

Utah screamed and fell, clawing at a patch of grass. He was dusted both sides, died two minutes after he twisted sidewise and came down. Randy, eyes still stormy, stood above the body.

He didn't kill because of a taste for blood-letting. But men of the killer breed forced men of honest principle to preserve law and order with the business end of a gun. Law of the gun—always the cow country's court of last appeal.

The hardness had gone out of Randy's face when he wheeled, trudged off to retrieve Saginaw's .30-30, strip Trimble's bridle and saddle from the dead horse, *en route* to the ranch.

CHAPTER III

Flaming Answer

SAGINAW and Trimble were at the fence when Randy returned. Old Pat's eyes were keenly admiring.

"You've got the right slant on things here, Randy," he declared, as the cowboy tossed the riding gear across the top rail, climbed over with

carbine in hand. "The quickest way to curb Ortega and his hellions is to roughhouse 'em every time they bust loose. You sure tucked Utah up! Meet Randy Coultras, Bill Trimble."

Cowboy and engineer shook.

"Trimble fetches hot news," the Forked Lightning owner continued. "Farlin, with a half dozen gunnies, dropped down on Trimble's party s'afternoon, yanked up most of the stakes they'd drove, an' set on the men with buzzin' lead. Trimble nor none of his men packin' even a .38, you mind!

"While the party was split, Ortega's bad hats stampeded the mounts and Trimble's horse headed into the arroyo, where he caught it. Havin' located a good hidin' place, Trimble's assistant and the rodman urged him to hit leather for the ranch, bring help."

Randy glanced at the engineer, whose normal ruddy color had returned.

"Looks as if I'd deserted the boys in a pinch," Trimble said apologetically, "and I didn't really like to hit out alone, leave 'em. Maybe that gang has gobbled them up, but I hope not. What about getting the sheriff from Barranca, Mr. Saginaw?"

"PAT, to you!" said the cattleman sharply. "And when you know me better, you'll learn I mostly fight my own battles without callin' in a lawman. Sheriff Venero is all right, if we need him, but we'll try our own brand of hell and repeat on the *señor's* scalawags first. Manuel must be smokin' *marihuana* to figure he can lick the railroad and me, too!"

Randy, carbine cradled in his arm, had started moving around the end of the house, corralward.

"Reckon we'd better sashay south to help Trimble's men, hey, Pat?"

Pat bestirred himself. "Betcha! Bring your saddle, Trimble, and pick a bronc."

Randy gave Trimble his carbine, and the old cowman got enough .30-30 shells to supply both himself and the engineer.

"You favor the good ol' Colt, don'tcha?" Pat grinned at Randy as he piled into the leather.

"Uh-huh. Like to see the whites of a man's eyes when I shoot," the puncher grinned back.

WHEN the three horsemen reached the far southeast corner of the great valley, flanked eastward by the serrated peaks of the Orejana Mountains, it was dark and quiet. That might betoken all well or just the reverse. Aided by starlight, the riders alertly crossed the low ridge where Trimble thought a couple of his helpers had sought cover when attacked. The men were not there now, at any rate, and Trimble breathed easier when no bullet-riddled bodies were discovered.

The horses plodded down toward the arroyo from which Trimble had galloped to get help. Except for light echoes, silence greeted the clip-clop of horses' hoofs in the dry stream-bed, until Trimble hailed, hand to mouth. Voices he was glad to hear shouted back and there ensued a hurried scrambling up along the east bank.

Presently the horsemen were surrounded by the five remaining men of Trimble's survey outfit. Nobody had been killed.

"They didn't shoot when they saw our boys had no guns," spoke Lockridge, the rodman, "but they told us we wouldn't get off so easy next time if our party stayed in the neighborhood, or drove another stake!"

"The *señor's* ultimatum!" Pat Saginaw smiled grimly in the star-pierced gloom. "He sure is bronc-wild!"

"But he can't stop—" began Trimble.

"He can't, pard, but he'll try, and

six-guns will be trumps in this yere game!" Saginaw boomed. "We'll try to find the scattered broncs of you boys that's afoot, and I'm askin' you all up to the house to have some food and rest."

"Thanks, but we're riding the other way," said Trimble. "We need new instruments and the only place to get them is at the construction outfit, coming on behind us. Down near Dobe Wells, right now. Look for you hereabouts tomorrow, Pat, and we'll be packing guns."

"Man talk! We'll do our own scrappin'!" Saginaw swatted the engineer between shoulder blades. "Be seein' you!"

NEXT afternoon Randy sat on a boulder in the arroyo, smoking, waiting for trouble to break with nerves as unruffled as Saginaw's. Pat was there, and five Forked Lightning cowhands, gun scabbards tied down for the occasion. Men to "ride the river with," hard-bitten, straight shooters.

Pat was lying near the summit of the east bank, so that he could peer over and watch the progress of Trimble's survey party well up the valley. All stakes torn up the day before had been replaced. In a few days more the graders would follow up these stakes with pick and shovel and scraper, and the tie-setting and rail-laying gangs would run a trail of steel across old cow trails.

Saginaw, with his cowboys, had jogged down from Forked Lightning headquarters before dawn, wishing to take cover while darkness lasted. Pat planned to surprise the gun gang from the Triangle ranch and shoot them out of their boots; but it began to look as if some spy of Ortega's had seen them go into hiding. Probably the Mexican cowman's bad hats were not anxious to clash openly with the survey outfit's protectors.

Pat, restless, was preparing to slide down the embankment when he saw riders string over a rise northward, and gallop toward Trimble and his handful of men. He yelled at the punchers in the arroyo bottom.

"They're here at last! Spurs and quirts, you wallopers!"

Pat lingered a moment longer, to witness the swift huddling together of Trimble's crew, at whim the newcomers rode two and three abreast, unlimbering hardware. He was seeking a steeple-crowned, costly sombrero among the bobbing Stetson hats, which would prove the boss of the Triangle was riding with his men. But Manuel apparently wasn't along.

The bulky cowman plunged downward in an avalanche of small-stones. Randy Coultras handed him his reins then swung for the saddle of his own mount.

Ahead they could see Trimble's crew surrounded. The gun-popping, booming for a few minutes, was silenced now.

PAT had told Trimble that morning not to put up resistance when the Triangle gun-riders hopped them; just stall and argue, give Pat and his boys time to come up. It looked to Randy, from a distance, as if Trimble had followed this advice, though he and his men had gone out to work wearing six-shooters. The firing heard probably had been done by the Triangle to intimidate.

Randy rocketed north, plucking gun from right-hand holster. Directly behind him hammered Pat. Randy's paint, traveling in twenty-foot leaps, belly laid to the ground, drew away even from Saginaw.

Several of the attacking riders had dismounted and advanced southward, pausing wherever a survey marker stuck out of the prairie sod, to pull it up. These men afoot were first to behold the Saginaw bunch com-

ing. The Ortega men had left rifles in saddle-holsters, but it was possible to reach their horses before that wild rider, Coultras, got close enough in to use the six-shooters which were the only weapons he carried.

A big, raw-boned man flung down the stake he had just yanked from the ground and led the rush back to the rein-dragging group of horses. Once there, the fellow unshipped his Winchester, balanced glinting barrel athwart the saddle and cut down while Randy was a hundred yards away.

Randy's pistol never lowered from its skyward tilt; he wasn't one to waste lead. But he hung in the spurs harder as a bullet screamed past his face. A rifle clattered a high note behind him, probably Pat's. Next shot of the Triangle man's winged far wide of Randy.

He faced an array of flaming Winchesters as he got within Colt range, and as the lances of fire struck at him, he swung over the side of his horse, crouching low with but one foot in a stirrup. His gun arm straightened at the same time.

THE death tube spewed fiery streaks. Hit between the eyes, a Triangle gun-rider slumped down behind his fidgeting horse. The animal's hoofs spurned insensible flesh as, in its fright, it wheeled to gallop off.

The hail of Winchester slugs lashed space which Randy's lean body would have filled in an upright posture. His flaming answer to the volley took toll of more than one enemy. Screams and curses, filled the air, along with the cracking of the .45s. Then he had run the gauntlet of menacing gun barrels, with not a scratch on himself or horse. A grim smile of satisfaction flashed and faded in his brown face when he perceived the short intervals between him and his friends, whose .30-30s were whipping lead in a continuous stream at the stake-pullers, now cut off from the rest of the raiders.

Randy slipped into the saddle, faced forward, letting the reins fall slack on the pinto's neck. Ten hostile faces were turned toward him, six-shooters and rifles lifted to drill him down. This counter-attack of Saginaw's had been a stunning surprise to Ortega's gunmen, who had reconnoitered the valley through field-glasses before riding down and had observed none besides Trimble and his five aides.

PIKE TOLAN, leader of the gun-riders, reacted to the surprise attack with a cunning born of long experience on owl-hoot trails. He hauled Winchester from beneath his saddle-fender, snarled at Trimble to face about and jabbed the engineer in the back with the muzzle. Trimble's men stood helplessly by.

The sight of his desperadoes falling under Randy's six-gun fire, under the exploding Winchesters of Saginaw and the five who raced in Pat's wake, maddened Tolan. He had come to kill, but realized the need of some caution with Saginaw's men warmed up to wipe his raiders out.

Randy grabbed the reins he had just dropped; his paint nearly sat on its tail in the effort to stop suddenly. Dandy's awareness of Bill Trimble's danger was the reason for his abrupt halt. He had an empty Colt in his hand; a loaded one on his left thigh—but he did not reach for the latter yet.

"You think somethin' of this *hombre's* life, maybe?" snarled Tolan, prodding the engineer unnecessarily. "Well, I'll kill him if you, Mr. Two-gun, and Pat and t'others, don't make yourselves hard to find in five minutes! That goes!"

Randy said nothing, figuring hard. The clattering hoofs of his friends'

horses were closing in rearward and Pat was roaring at Tolan, curses mingling with the strident order to shift that gun barrel away from Trimble's body. His horse steamed up beside Randy's quiet paint.

The cowpuncher was steadily eyeing Bill Trimble. Thirty or forty yards separated them. Certainly the Saginaw bunch had no intention of hightailing as Tolan warned them to do, and there seemed, in Randy's opinion, to be but one other "out," barring the sure sacrifice of the engineer.

It was risky, depended much on Trimble's own quickness and nerve. Though Bill was no cowboy, reared to meet life's emergencies as a matter of course, Randy didn't figure him as without spunk. Trimble knew Randy was gunslick, too, which should give him confidence.

With penetrating gaze, nodding once almost imperceptibly toward the ground, Randy conveyed the message of action which had occurred to him. Intelligence lighted the eye of the engineer—his head turned slightly to show he understood and was ready.

"Keep that big galoot talkin'," Randy said out of the side of his mouth to Saginaw, not knowing Tolan's name.

PAT never asked why; he began diverting tall Pike's attention with his explosive remarks.

Bill Trimble watched for Randy to bat his eyes, which he felt would be the signal. It came, while Tolan was making hot retort to Saginaw, in his anger unconsciously shifting the Winchester until its muzzle was above the engineer's shoulder.

Trimble pitched forward as if he had been shot. Simultaneously, Randy's left hand streaked down and up. A tongue of fire licked at Pike, a .45 slug pulped his heart. His Winchester smoked at the instant death touched him, but it hurt none.

"Charge 'em!" whooped Randy, stabbing the pinto's flanks.

Trimble had leaped to his feet, was racing clear of the opposing horsebackers when Randy's yell pealed out. The rest of the survey party scattered after Bill, dodging as they ran, momentarily expecting to feel lead smash into their unprotected backs.

BUT the Triangle gunmen were not thinking of the surveyors then. They saw several spur-digging horsemen plunging at them; carbines and six-guns were crashing in a storm of lead. Saddles were emptied. The Triangle fighters broke formation, swapping shot for shot as they strung out.

Randy's steel-bitten paint barged into a gun-fighter's roan mount, both horses staggering with the impact. The outlaw's gun smoked so close to Randy's face that his skin was powder burned. Just in time to cheat death, he jerked his head aside. His left-hand gun swung on the roan's rider. Screaming in agony, Randy's opponent swayed sidewise, rolled from the saddle.

A shot from another direction ripped off Randy's hat. He lay low on the pinto's neck, whirled it on the track of the man who had picked him as a target. The outlaw raced in a half-circle, thumb tripping his gun hammer. Randy stopped his pinto suddenly, slipped down on the off-side, threw gun across the saddle. A snap-shot piled the gunnie's bronc — accidentally. Randy had aimed to kill the rider.

Points of flame began to stab through the haze of dust and Randy ducked involuntarily as a bullet ricocheted from his saddle-horn. The fellow was belly-flop behind a barrier of horseflesh, well sheltered.

Randy cramped trigger, only to hear an ominous click. Both six-

shooters were empty now. Around him battle raged; pistols, rifles were popping, horses thundering, men shouting. Standing behind his horse, bent over so that his head and shoulders didn't show, he clamped his attention on the task of reloading those .45s.

Still the bullets came singing toward him. He swore and twitched back his left leg as a lead plum ripped through leather and flesh. But it didn't feel like a serious wound; he could stand all right. His legs, he realized, were the only targetable part of him as he stood shielded by the restive paint's body.

His guns were loaded. The man behind the horse carcass had ceased to make gunpowder music, probably was reloading his own .45s.

But as Randy stuck toe in stirrup, got astride, shooting burst anew from the mound of horseflesh. Randy filled his hands, guided the paint with his knees. The horse went straight for the outlaw, sprawled out with hatless head and wide shoulders revealed above the barrel of the dead cow pony. Randy's shots thundered in one-two order.

PEERING through the smoke, he saw his enemy leaning sidewise, supported by one arm. He was hit, but a die-hard. He raised one six-shooter, blasted at the fast-racking cow-puncher. But Randy sat straight, untallied by the buzzing hail.

Twenty yards, fifteen — he cut down as the desperate man continued firing. That close, Randy couldn't fail to drive lead to vital spots. The Triangle rider half rose, jack-knifed across his horse's body, lay motionless.

Randy checked the high speed of his pinto. A few rods farther on he pulled up, looked around, impressed with the sudden silence of the valley in contrast to the tumult which had kept the echoes clashing.

CHAPTER IV

Dead Cattle

PAT SAGINAW came pounding up. The old cattleman was tying a bandanna around a bloody wrist.

"I figure we won," said Coultras soberly. "What'd it cost us?"

"Pair o' good men," Pat announced sadly, leaning on the bridle rein. "Look yonder, Randy, and you'll see two Ortega gunnies skimmin' the plain. They're all that got away; but I ain't countin' on this defeat discouragin' Manuel any, not by a long shot!"

"He's sure a hog for punishment, then," Randy commented, and glanced southward. "Here comes Trimble and his men, none of 'em nicked, looks like. What two boys went under?" He dipped fingers in vest pocket for the makings.

Gruffly Saginaw told him, trying to hide his emotion roused over the loss of two good saddle-pounders.

"Hate rides hard, Randy! That crazy Mex will fight T. P. and A. and me till the last gun's empty or he's headed up Death Draw. But you'll notice he ain't showed up personal yet in his war on the railroad. That's cagey of him—so's he can put the blame on others for jumpin' the surveyors, keep his own dang boots pretty clean."

But Manuel Ortega's ability to hate overleaped the cunning which afforded him temporary immunity, he shortly proved.

Attacks on Trimble's crew were not renewed on Forked Lightning territory, and in ten days' time the rails were stretching up the valley, almost under the shadow of the Orejanas' cloud-piercing peaks. The boarding-train, with its dining and bunk cars, stood at the ever-changing end of track; construction trains

were rolling north from Dobe Wells, loaded, rolling south again, empty.

Saginaw had contracted with the T. P. and A.'s commissary department to supply fresh beef for the road hands; this was cheaper for the railroad than shipping meat in refrigerator cars from the Wells. Pat, Randy and a handful of punchers took two days to round up a herd of two hundred head, which the railroad would kill and dress as needed. It was part of the contract that some of Pat's boys should herd the stock while the road was building up the Forked Lightning, then across Ortega's Spanish grant into the town of Barranca, which already was booming.

Late one afternoon the gathered herd was stringing north from the brush coverts of Pat's south range, where most of the beef critters ranged. The survey party was already marking out a right of way on Ortega's grant, but if there had been trouble, the men away on roundup hadn't yet heard of it.

Pat was on point that afternoon. He intended watering the herd at Ortega's water-hole and holding it there, where grass was good, for one night at least. He supposed, of course, that Ortega had built a new fence around his oasis, but the wire-cutters the boys carried in their cantinas would soon destroy the barrier.

RANDY was riding swing, neckerchief pulled up over his nose and throat to keep out the dust the cattle raised. On his right gleamed the completed T. P. and A. tracks, which the herd had paralleled for a considerable length of its journey northward. He saw the long boarding-train on its siding, about a quarter of a mile from where he rode beside the column of beef steers.

Suddenly his gray eyes opened wider. There was a trim-figured girl standing on the platform of the end car, evidently watching the cattle go by. Just the fact that she was a girl intrigued Randy—it was weeks since he had seen anyone in skirts. When she waved her hand, seeing that he was looking her way, the cowboy swung his battered Stetson in reply.

He looked behind him, yelled at the other swing rider on that side of the herd. "Watch the bunch-quitters for me, Perry. I want to chin with the little lady yonder."

"Okeh," shouted Perry. "If you need any help, trigger your gun."

RANDY approached the train at rapid canter. And he was thoroughly repaid for making that side trip, the minute he got a close-up of the girl on the boarding-car. Brown-haired, brown-eyed, with bee-stung lips, a figure that would have drawn attention anywhere, the girl smiled a welcome which went to the puncher's head—and heart.

He had stuffed hat under arm as he rounded the pinto to the end of the car. The girl descended to the last step, close to him. He didn't realize what a picturesque figure of a man he was.

"Doggone," he exclaimed, "I never expected to see such a pretty girl as you 'way out here on the lone-prai-ree. Uh—I'm a cowhand for the rancher who owns this valley range. You work for the railroad, huh?"

"My mother runs the boarding-car, and I wait on table, help her and the cook generally. My name's Mary Doyle."

Randy told her his name, and wondered what to say next. He wasn't usually tongue-tied with girls, but a strange thrill passed through him every time she looked at him with those magnetic brown eyes. He liked her. He more than liked—

"Mother and I've just been trans-

ferred from the mid-Western to the Western division, and I like the change, if she doesn't!" Mary Doyle broke the uncomfortable silence. "I'd read a lot about cowboys and cattle, and it all seemed so romantic."

Randy saw that she was eyeing his guns, and he hastened to say, not knowing how her Middle-West ideas might classify a fellow who toted deadly weapons:

"Just ornaments!"

She smiled, shook her head reprovingly. "Oh, then, you aren't the Randy Coultras who did such game fighting for the survey crew, saved Bill Trimble's life? You see, Bill told me and I recognized your name."

Randy flushed and grinned again. "That's right—they ain't altogether ornaments—Heck, I got to chase them cows up to a water-hole mile or so above. But I shore hope I'll see you s'more, Miss Mary."

His heart thumped so loudly he was sure she could hear it as she smiled, "Sure—Randy!"

THAT evening, as the cattle were being thrown off-trail at Ortega's water-hole, the big boss sought Randy, clapped him on his hard-muscled shoulder.

"Cookin' up a romance, are you, boy? Well, fly at it. But don't let it interfere with your sidin' me in this fight against Manuel, which's just begun—"

"Side you till the cows come home, Pat; but how'd you know?" Randy reddened in the gloom.

"I looked back from the point, seen your dust cloud rollin' for that piece of calico like Romeo hisself on the rampage." Saginaw's laugh boomed above the lowing of the drinking cattle, he heeled about, strode off.

It had surprised the Forked Lightning men to find no new fence enclosing the water-hole; the cut and tangled barbed wire which they had removed on a former occasion lay, with uprooted posts, far off to one side. Looked as though Ortega had given up the idea of blocking his neighbor from the water, or perhaps he had been too much occupied with battling the railroad builders recently to bother erecting another fence.

ANOTHER thing noted and commented on as the men hunkeered around the cook-fire was that no cattle of Ortega's were in the water-hole's vicinity.

The spot had looked dismal and deserted when the herd from the lower range arrived.

Most of the Forked Lightning steers had filled up on water and turned to grazing before the men were through eating. The horses had been kept from mingling with the cattle at the water-hole because of the crush, no rider wanting to take the chance of his mount's getting hooked or having a leg snapped.

The better part of an hour had passed when Pat and his boys piled their empty tin plates and cups by the wagon, started for the horses, tied up to a picket line, cavalry fashion.

"We can water 'em now," Pat remarked, after a glance at the practically deserted oasis over his shoulder. Then he noticed a moaning sound coming from somewhere in the loosely bunched herd, and as he stopped, his leonine head turning inquiringly, a yell burst from the rider on guard:

"Boss, come a-runnin'! These steers've been poisoned!"

Randy raced to the horses, tore loose a couple of hackamores and led back an animal for Pat. Together they faded into the gloom toward the edge of the herd. Ladue, the herd rider, was on the ground beside a writhing, vomiting steer. The ani-

mal was trying to regain its feet.

Randy Coultras reached with steel-muscled arm, tailed it up, and the critter lurched off in the direction of the water-hole. Other cattle that had been down and struggled up without benefit of cowboy, headed in a straggling line for water.

"Thirsty again—with their bellies awash and plumb saggin'!" exclaimed Ladue. "That water is poisoned, sure as hell, but I dunno what with. It's spreadin' all through the herd—look at 'em go!"

"IT'S arsenic," Randy said positively, grimly. "I savvy the signs—seen cows poisoned with it up Utah way. I reckon, Pat, it's all up with this bunch. Every last one of 'em's swallered enough—"

"By mighty!" Pat balled his huge fists. "Another trick of Manuel's, the lousy son! He thinks that by destroyin' my cattle, he not only whacks me, but also the railroad—them jerries got to have meat to do their work.

"There ain't nothin' we can do?" he appealed to Randy. "No wonder there wasn't no fence up, not a head of Triangle cattle around—I ought to ha' been suspicious!"

"Nothin' to do," Randy shook his head sorrowfully. "It's a damn good thing we didn't drive the horses over there."

"And say—how about ourselves?" Pat said with mounting rage. "Cookie used water from his keg or we'd be in the same fix them steers are. Reckon Manuel hoped we'd git pizened, too!"

The other punchers had joined the group and all were vigorously denouncing the sly deviltry of Ortega, when Dodd, the cook, hailed loudly from the wagon. Pat Saginaw kicked his horse into a lope, and Randy followed. Dodd, unflatteringly called "the old woman" by the outfit, was standing in the firelight with what appeared to be an empty sack in his hand.

"I just found this under a sage-brush, Pat," he held it up. "Ten pound sack stenciled 'white arsenic'. Is that what ails the steers—some o' this stuff in the water? Looks harmless, like flour."

"You've hit it, Dodd—the herd is dyin' on its feet," and Pat cursed.

"Must've been a lot more'n ten pounds throwed in to make it sure-killin'!" Randy pondered, taking the limp sack. "The hellers dropped this by accident—but it's good evidence, eh, Pat?"

"Yeh!" Pat sat straight on his bronc. "There's goin' to be a showdown over this before another sun—I'll notch Manuel and collect a critter of his for every critter of mine that he pizened. Randy, you and Pink Holliday come with me to Triangle headquarters; rest of the boys will stay by the herd till the last one's down!"

The three of them charged through the night ten minutes later, and Randy, for one, was glad when he could no longer hear the moaning of that dying herd. They were still about three miles from the big cluster of buildings which comprised the Triangle home ranch, when a steady drumming of hoofs trending out of the north caused the avenging trio to check rein.

THEY were passing through a section dotted with greasewood and yucca, which cast many shadows, deep enough to hide stationary horsemen.

"It's most likely to be Triangle men," Pat said in a low voice, stepping down from his horse, "and they don't know we're here. But anyhow we'll give 'em a hoot before we open up—I ain't never bushed a man yet."

The riders from the north surged nearer, pounding along as if bent on a grim mission. Saginaw, Randy and

Pink held cocked six-shooters, lined to smash lead at the half-dozen galloping figures, which were skylighted.

"Who's that?" Pat yelled suddenly.

CHAPTER V

The Sheriff Racks His Chips

THE reply surprised Pat and his punchers: "Sheriff Venero and deputies! Whatcha doin' over here, Pat?"

"I could ask you the same," Pat retorted, resuming the saddle. He didn't sound pleased, although he liked Jack Venero well enough personally. Pat thought the coming of the law might interfere with the execution of his plans for reprisal.

The two parties joined, but Pat was reticent as to why he was riding hard on hostile territory until the sheriff good-naturedly said, "I'll tell first, you old hardshell! Ortega's gun-handy boys have been snipin' at Bill Trimble's outfit for the past day or two. Trimble figured you were too busy roundin' up stock to help him like you did before, so he came to me only as a last resort.

"I know you like to fight your own battles, Pat, and all that, but I ought've been called in before this. I'm officially visitin' Ortega now, expect to make some arrests. Got bench warrants."

"I knowed you'd gum the works!" growled Pat. "Jack, if you're a good friend of mine, turn back and let us three handle the *señor* and his gang. Look here, you don't know the latest reason I got for wantin' to peg out Manuel's hide."

He launched into an explanation which astonished the sheriff, no less his pair of regular deputies and the three deputized punchers from Barranca.

"Pretty bad, pretty bad," muttered Venero. "We'll see what Manuel has to say about that arsenic sack. You know, Pat, I've heard tales that the original Ortega was somethin' of a bandit when this State was part of Mexico. Looks like the outlaw streak had cropped up again. You're stringin' along with us?"

"Yeah, since you won't leave matters in our hands," Pat said gruffly. "But we ain't bein' swore as deputies—the kind of law we favor, in this kind of mess, is gun law."

"Well, don't spring anything till I've had my innin' as peace officer," Sheriff Venero urged. "I'm really glad to have your backin', Pat, for Manuel has likely got a score or more gunnies besides them you tallied."

The nine horsemen strung out along the lane between yucca and greasewood, avoiding gullies, ravines and rock nests where enemies might be lying to cut down on them. Manuel Ortega had stepped so far outside the law that it was possible he would attack even the county sheriff, if it could be done from cover.

LIGHTS were on in the big adobe main building as the visitors, official and unofficial, bunched up and rode three abreast into the 'dobe fenced yard. No one tried to bar their way; no one took pot shots at them —so far.

"Pink, stay with the horses," Saginaw directed his other gunslick cowboy. It was good generalship to leave one of the best men to guard the riding stock, as later their lives might depend on hitting leather out of there, "lively and sudden."

They got up to the front door of the ranch house, built like a Spanish *casa*, with *patio* and a flat roof, rimmed on all four sides by a parapet, before anyone about the ranch seemed aware of their coming. To Randy Coultras, at least, this spelled gun-trap, a reception of violence

awaiting the unwanted visitors. Suddenly, Manuel himself bulked in the doorway.

"*Señor* Sheriff, what do you want?" His baleful glance flicked from Venero's tense face to the rage-flushed one of Pat Saginaw. No pretense of welcome—just the blunt question.

"Ask us in and I'll tell you, Ortega," the peace officer said sharply.

"Do these men," indicating Pat and Randy, "have to come, too? They are no friends of mine!"

"They've got business with you as well as me," nodded Sheriff Venero.

"In that case," the Mexican cowman stood aside; his face was inscrutable. Perhaps he was pondering whether the death trap at the disputed water-hole had failed him altogether, since two of the intended victims were before him.

"If 'twasn't for the sheriff, I'd 'a' come forkin' my bronc intuh your settin' room, foggin' a gun!" rasped Saginaw, as Ortega led the way to a living room.

The sheriff winced. That was Pat, afraid of no man, ready to go the whole rope-length for a friend who stuck by him—but a bad enemy and tactless as hell!

"Always the bully, Saginaw!" Ortega turned eyes black with hate, his voice a snarl.

"If I'm a bully, where do you get off?" Pat bellowed. "Bushwhacker and poisoner fits you for names!"

MANUEL ORTEGA said nothing at the moment. They had entered the room next the *patio,* where were a large oaken table and numerous chairs. Ortega asked them to be seated, but they preferred to stand. And Randy Coultras, sensing treachery, posted himself in the doorway leading from the hall, where he could keep an eye on the *patio* door nearly opposite. He had pushed his holsters forward on criss-crossed belts.

The sheriff had started to speak when spur-chains clashed on the paved *patio.* The door moved wide to admit a lean, slightly stooped figure in black Stetson, black chaps. Even his shirt was of dark hue. An American, and he had the look of a desperado.

"My new major-domo, Sime Hardin," Ortega said smoothly. "Pike Tolan, who had his place formerly—"

"Went out on the hot end of a bullet!" gritted Pat.

"It's a wonder you'd bring that up, seein' what your hellions was a-doin' at the time.

"I was about to say," scowled Ortega, "that Pike Tolan had retired—permanently." Embittered though he was over the heavy casualties he had suffered, Ortega had no comeback at Saginaw, because his gunmen had been lawless aggressors.

"You want me, boss?" Sime Hardin said out of a tight mouth, scarcely moving his lips.

LEANING in the hall doorway, Randy felt positive that as the eyes of boss and foreman met, some wordless message passed between them.

"*Si,* Hardin," Ortega nodded; then to Jack Venero, "Relieve our suspense, Sheriff, and we shall be grateful."

"You're tryin' to stop the railroad from crossin' your grant—" Sheriff Venero began, feeling that it was all a waste of words.

"A certain number of acres had been condemned for a right of way," Ortega interposed heatedly, "but my attorneys have assured me the fight is not yet lost, that a higher court may give reversal of decision."

The sheriff suddenly lost patience.

"I got bench warrants for ten of your riders and I'm takin' 'em back to Barranca, so's Trimble can identify the guilty ones in the mornin'. You'll go, too."

"I will *not* go; no one will go!"

There was a desperate light in Ortega's eyes. He was as taut as a maguey rope anchored to a "crossed up" yearling.

"You see, Jack," Pat remarked, breaking an intolerable silence, never removing his rage-glinting eyes from Manuel, "it's gun-handlin' he needs, like I told you! Here, you hydrophoby skunk," he reached under his coat, flung the sack which had contained arsenic on the table between him and the Triangle owner, "that was found under a bush by the waterhole, where one of your careless human coyotes dropped it. You'll notice we didn't die, us men—but the cattle did, damn you!"

"Another little matter the law has to take up with you, *Señor* Ortega," said Venero in a hard, commanding voice. "Call your men and get your hat!"

The climax came swiftly. It was evident all along Ortega must have anticipated a visit from the sheriff and prepared for it. His face was like a madman's as he leaped sidewise toward the door into the *patio*, which Sime Hardin, when he entered, had left wide open.

The pistols in Ortega's ornate holsters flicked out as he sprang. But he made the mistake of trying to kill two men at once.

THERE is no doubt that, hating Pat, he would have chosen the latter as his sure victim over the sheriff. But stout-hearted Venero swayed forward with a slug in his heart, hand reaching for a gun, while Pat Saginaw, the ever lucky, ducked low, bobbed up again with a long smear of red across one cheek. A long-barreled Colt was in his fist and his bullets ripped splinters from the *patio* door-frame as Ortega ran through to the court.

Sime Hardin, snatching a Colt from each leg-tied scabbard, covered his boss' retreat. Other gunmen rattled in from the *patio*, fire-lances tipping their bent arms.

Randy Coultras yanked his hoglegs, threw a shot at Sime Hardin, just as one of the dead sheriff's cowboy deputies reeled back and lay spread-eagled on the carpet with blood seeping from a hole in his skull. But Hardin wasn't even scratched by Coultras' bullet, for someone had fired at Randy simultaneously from the rear of the hall. The unexpected slug grazed Randy's bronzed neck and caused him to jerk aside, so that the gun covering the man in black fell out of line.

RANDY whirled, found himself confronted by three agate-eyed *hombres*, and the lightning glance he swept over them revealed how they had been able to slip up in his rear unheard—all were in their stockinged feet! His guns were up, hip-lined, as he spun about.

The man who had fired at his back was quickly identified by the smoke-wisping .45 he held. Randy's guns pounded, left, right, left. The fellow with the smoky pistol stumbled, his body bent, his weapon blasting flame into the hall floor. He nearly brushed Randy as he pitched on his face.

The cowboy's back was against the wall to the right of the doorway. He saw the gleam of steel that was not gun steel in the hand of a swart assailant, saw the man's arm swing. Randy bent from the hips, cramping his triggers as a nine-inch bowie swished overhead and stabbed into the wall with buckhorn handle vibrating. A scream issued from the knife-thrower's lips. Lead battered him down to the floor, a bloody huddle of range clothes and of human clay.

His comrade, last of the cat-footed trio, was crouching in a swirl of gun smoke. The only illumination came through the living room door, but

Randy could see him fairly well despite the gun haze and the surrounding gloom of the hallway. Triggers tripped, crash succeeded crash.

A howl of agony came from the Triangle gunnie. The boom of Randy's gun drowned the noise of the man plunging down.

THE battle in the living room was at its height. Pat Saginaw had upset the oaken table on its side, so that the broad top faced the *patio* door. Behind this heavy barrier, underneath a swinging lamp, the old cowman knelt with his hat off, the remaining men of Venero's posse siding him. As Randy peered through the hall door, vicious lead from the gunmen holding the exit to the *patio* cut down the sheriff's first deputy, who was poorly sheltered.

Randy swore. The law was getting the worst of it. The puncher quickly perceived a way to gain advantage over their numerous enemies, wondered that the experienced Pat hadn't thought of it himself. Every time one of the men back of the table raised head and arms to shoot, he became a good target for outlaw guns in the flood of lamplight.

Randy had reloaded his hoglegs. He aimed one ceilingward, the light cracked out, glass and oil spilled down on Pat and his companions.

The two-gun puncher hit the floor in the dark, scrambled crabwise to his friends behind the table barrier. The glass in the *patio* door had long since been shattered; the woodwork of door and frame was bullet-pocked. In the door opening were bunched Ortega's henchmen, as many as could crowd there with room to sling a gun, standing figures shooting over the heads of kneeling ones.

The only light in the *patio* came from the stars, but it was real illumination compared to the sudden pitchy blackness of the living room, and the Triangle gunmen themselves had become the easy targets. What was even worse for them, they now could see only the gun flashes of the men sheltered by the table.

Pat snapped, "Good on your head, Randy! Now we'll drill 'em to hell-angone!"

Randy hitched up close to the table, rose on his knees. Fire spewed from his .45s with deadly aim and din. He hoped to cut down on Hardin, believing him to be one of the most dangerous contenders against them. But Sime appeared to have withdrawn. Nobody with stooped shoulders like his was out there. Other men were going down under the destructive streams of lead from the darkened room.

Randy knew that Pat had suddenly lifted to leather-covered knees beside him; together their Colt-guns rapped screaming slugs until the doorway was clear, except for dead men clogging the threshold. Randy caught the clatter of horses' hoofs in the *patio*. The gang was whipped and breaking away.

He had recourse to his ammunition belts, then leaped up and around the overturned table. Pat followed closely. Venero's second deputy and two cowpunchers, all of them hurt more or less seriously, straggled after.

FIRST to climb over the silent bodies of silent men blocking the *patio* door, Randy flung backward at a sudden flaming of six-shooters. The door was being watched. He had glimpsed men mounting in the starlight. Apparently the horses had been brought to the court from the corrals, saddled and ready for flight.

Randy set his teeth together hard, took a long chance by leaping forward again. He was in the *patio* now and bullets cracked and droned from the flagstones, threatening him with certain death.

He went down on one knee in a patch of shadow and whammed shot after shot at the horsemen as they loped toward an open gate at the far side of the court. He heard Pat, breaking forth from the darkness of the living room, grunt as if a bullet had touched him up somewhere, but the old cowman did not falter. Fire licked from his Colt muzzle; a man swinging to the saddle toppled back on the flagstones with a yell of agony.

Spurring to reach the open gate, at least a dozen men got through seemingly unscathed. Three or four riderless broncs galloped after the cavalcade. Randy, his guns empty again, counted the .45s. still in his fluted belts, loaded his irons, ran for the gate with Pat and the others not far rearward. Randy wanted to kill or catch Ortega and Hardin; the others didn't matter so much. But it looked hopeless.

He dashed through the *patio* gateway, saw the gang rounding the south corner of the big *casa*. His mind was set on getting to the horses, enlisting Pink Holliday's aid in riding after the outlawed Triangle men. Randy was yelling Pink's name as he ran, wondering why Pink's gun wasn't working, for the horsemen had gone by within Colt-gun range of the cowboy left to guard the horses. Maybe Pink was dead, the thought suddenly struck him!

RANDY darted toward the rein-dragging mounts beside the porch. He couldn't see Pink till he was up to the horses, then discovered the cowboy stretched on the ground. Pink had drawn gun, but his hand had opened, letting it slide to the earth. Coultras charged down on his knees, listened for heartbeats.

"Is he gone, too?" asked a voice suddenly. Pat, who had had a surfeit of gunsmoke for at least once in his life, stood there, gripping the horn of a saddle wearily.

"No. Slammed on the conk with a gun barrel," Randy looked up. "Must 'a' been done by the three jiggers who sneaked up on me in the hall with their boots off. They couldn't Injun into the house past Pink, and knockin' him cold saved the noise of shootin'. Dang it, I wanted Pink to ride with me. But I'll go alone—"

"You will not!" Pat told him emphatically. "Manuel's on the dodge now and we'll get him and every black-hearted son later. It's no one-man job, though I'm figurin' Billy the Kid hadn't much, if anything, on you as a gunnie, boy! Poor Venero—he was one sheriff didn't die in bed!"

CHAPTER VI

Wildfire

EVERY man's hand was against Ortega for the slaying of such popular citizens as Sheriff Venero and his first deputy. Some contended that the gang would ride for the Mexican border, thus checkmating all attempts of the Barranca County citizenry to avenge the killings. But Pat disagreed that the Ortega outfit had any intention of sloping the country.

By daylight Pat and Randy had traced the outlaws to the west bank of the Orejana River, which, like many other so-called rivers in the West, was never more than creek size and a good part of the year bone-dry. Boulder-strewn, it was filled with the masses of granite which had bounced off the near-by mountainside.

"They're yonder, hidin'," Pat declared, pointing at the frowning mountains, "even if we can't see no sign of their crossin' in the river

bottom. East bank's too flinty to hold tracks, so it's no use lookin' over there. It would take an army of men a year to comb all the hideaways in that range—but you wait, highpockets, they'll come out of hidin' to strike at us and the road builders again!"

Randy felt sure Pat had the right of it. Gone outlaw, Ortega would carry on guerrila warfare against those whom he hated, dash back to safety in the Orejana Mountains after a raid. He would be twice as dangerous now, since he had no chance of ever returning peacefully to the Triangle and his neck was menaced by the hangman's noose.

WITH Jack Venero's surviving deputy, who became acting sheriff of the county, Saginaw and young Coultras next day rode the Triangle range, looking for cattle of Ortega's to take the place of the two hundred which had died of arsenic poisoning. But all they could find were a dozen or so widely scattered cows.

"I betcha," Randy hazarded a guess as the trio drew rein on a grassy knoll, "that Manuel had a lot of stock drove into the Orejanas when he saw the railroad comin'. Figured he might be forced to abandon the ranch and would need beef to feed himself and men. Planned his campaign like one of them rebel generals down in Old Mexico."

"Smart one way, but dumb another," commented Pat, leaning with elbow on saddle-horn, brows puckered. "Rather lose all his property than just a piece of it. That chili pepper temper of his surely was his ruin."

"Yeah, Manuel was high-chinned." the acting sheriff spat and nursed a bandaged shoulder.

"I ain't doubtin' but what he did shove a herd over intuh the Orejanas," Pat went on, "and yet I am opinin' he didn't have many head left to make up the bunch. He was sellin' 'em to pay for his fight in the courts. Nope, he ain't got more'n a few hundred critters, if that many, in his hideaway—but the T. P. and A. workmen need beef. I'll have to take it on the chin temporary for them poisoned cattle and round-up another bunch of my own."

At dawn the following day, ten of the Forked Lightning outfit, inclusive of the boss, were popping brush along the Orejana's west bank, Pat's east boundary, chasing out all the beef steers they cut sign on. By noon the chaparral riders had hazed thirty critters into the open, rounded them in a loose bunch. The men ate, threw saddles on fresh mounts and whacked again into the heavy brush.

The brush growth covered a good mile from the plain's edge to the Orejana's west bank, and extended north and south for fully two miles. Randy Coultras was by himself in late afternoon, had stopped to tighten slipping cinches after trailing a particularly elusive wild one, when he smelled smoke. It came from behind.

HE was startled, glanced around quickly. Where there was smoke, there was fire, and this was the last place a man would select to have fire catch him. It would surround him at racing speed through the dry thickets.

Randy saw smoke, long streamers of it, not over a quarter of a mile westward, spreading into a wall of vapor. A crackling sound came to his ears. Behind the smoke writhed yellow serpents of flame. The wind blew toward the distant river—which was bad, for Randy.

He vaulted into the saddle, whirled his panicky mount on a dime, sliced its flanks with the spurs to ride at the pall of fire-shot smoke. Randy shouted the names of Pat and Pink, of the other boys riding the thick-

ets, who ought to be somewhere near. A shrill yell answered, and a horseman popped out of a tangle of chaparral, leaning low on his scared bronc's neck. Pink Holliday!

"Randy," yelled Pink, "it's burnin' down so fast on this side we can't bust out north or west. I know—I tried it!"

"What the hell!" Randy husked. "How'd it start, you reckon!" He checked his sweating horse, since they were cut off in the direction he was riding.

"Seen a couple Ortega men ridin' like hell away from a post oak thicket they'd fired! Before I could shoot they was gone in the smoke and I was pretty interested in getting out of there!"

"Ortega men, eh!" Randy's teeth clicked. "It would be them, the unbranded devils. Been spyin' on us, reckoned it was a good chance to smoke us up without twitchin' a trigger. Hell's delight! Look there—cattle!"

With extreme difficulty he controlled his horse as he pointed out steers pelting through the brush. The cattle were wild-eyed, some bawling their terror, but the majority ran without sound, smashing into and out of the close-grown thickets.

Shouts of men were heard. Pat Saginaw's voice boomed out, and Randy and Pink spurred to meet him. Pat was heading up from the south with two other punchers he had picked up in his flight. They were not thinking of catching cattle now, any of those harassed horsemen.

"ORTEGA done it!" Saginaw bellowed, as the parties met. "We shot one of the boogers too dead to skin as he was firin' a brush patch. But there's plenty of 'em on the edge, workin' hard to roast us alive.

"How's it over north with you fellows?"

"Blazin' hell!" yapped Pink, no coward, but pale with the idea of being a live victim of cremation. "Where's the rest of our bunch? Gosh, look at them cattle go—and I'll bet there's some got ketched and burnt up already!"

"Toward the river's the only way we can go," Saginaw decided. "Ain't no escape south, where we come from. Maybe some of the boys are ahead of us, over east. Rattle your hocks!"

All the missing riders were there. Eastward, too, were some of the Ortega gang, riding and lighting brush fires between their rangeland enemies and the Orejana River. It was half a mile at least to the river. Over open ground, the race might have been run swiftly; but heavy brush obstructed progress, cut down their speed lamentably. There was hardly need to spur the broncs, fear-driven by the roaring monster closing in from three sides.

ALL eight prodded horseflesh for the far-off river, which was not visible as they rode because of the intervening leagues of chaparral. The way seemed clear of danger; there was no smoke, no yellow flame-light in front of them—not during the first twenty minutes of brush bucking. But the fire at their rear roared on ominously, gaining so fast that heat-laden air currents, striking their backs, kept them uncomfortably reminded of their fate if they should be trapped in the fire zone.

Cattle were running to right and left of them, as well as far in the lead. Hardly any critters were behind them now; all had been smoked out of the brush or overtaken by the flames.

Randy contrived to keep an eye on the skyline where it met the tips of tall-standing brush clumps eastward. He was looking for smoke sign, the appearance of which should

indicate the vindictive Triangle gunnies had got around far enough to touch off new fires in their path, complete the circle of death.

Suddenly the two-gun puncher stiffened—a light puff of smoke arose in the east, smoke from tinder-dry brush. Other puffs shot upward, merging in a fleece-like cloud. Randy yelled to his friends, who were riding the broncs over the brush-tangled ground. Heads tipped up, curses ripped from tense lips.

"Keep goin', keep goin'—a little more to northeast, pards!" Randy shouted.

Some dwarf oaks were ahead and an idea had struck him forcibly. If the incendiaries weren't too far off maybe he could do something with the Colts on his thighs to keep a lane clear of fire, down to the river.

A dozen leaps of his horse and he was under a tree, standing in the stirrups as he approached, reaching high to grab a lower branch. Leaving the saddle, he twisted his body upward and straddled the strong limb.

"Pink!" he yelled, "hey, Pink! Catch my bronc! Hold him a minute and I'll join you!"

Pink Holliday grabbed the slack reins from the saddle-horn, brought both animals to a restive stand. Saginaw pulled up; the others halted reluctantly, gazed back at the cowboy in the tree, who stood braced against the trunk, lowering hands speedily to his guns. Randy appeared to be pleased over something, for there was a hard grin on his face.

THE waiting men guessed what was in the wind as he pulled his .45s, lined them with arms held nearly straight in front of him. Randy was sighting on two Triangle men, moving on foot from brush-clump to brush-clump, setting each one ablaze—and the range wasn't above fifty yards! A mounted man, leading two horses, was trailing the pair, and he presented an even better target! But the fire-setters must be the first to stop lead, to end their fiendish work.

The noise of the racing cattle, the crackling and booming of the brush, had kept Randy's voice from being heard by the Ortega gunnies when he shouted to Pink. And the ruthless Triangle boys apparently had not distinguished any difference between the staccato drumming of horses and the pounding of cattle, for they went about their hellish business with no show of alarm.

RANDY had no intention of warning such hell-hounds before he shot. His pistol muzzles smoked as his thumbs hit the hammers, left, right. One of the two men carrying a fire-brand jerked up on his toes, staggered a few paces, clutching at the gun on his leg.

The second man hit went down, only to rise on his knees a moment afterward, gun out and fogging. At first he shot wild, into the brush; then he and his companion both spied Randy in the tree-fork as flame pulsed again from the cowboy's guns.

The outlaw on his knees screamed and pitched on his face, landing across the firebrand he had let fall, and shortly smoke was curling up from his smoldering clothes. Randy felt the wind of a passing bullet as the man with the buckling legs sought to drill him off his perch. Randy cut loose with both hands, saw his target wilt to earth.

The fellow on horseback conjured a gun into his fist and bark flew from the tree trunk, close by Randy's shoulder. Another bullet buzzed after it; then the rider wheeled to gallop north, his nervous pony having turned the wrong way as the shots were fired from its back. The outlaw passed behind a

thicket which screened himself and the animal.

Randy perseveringly lashed the thicket with a leaden hail, taking the chance he'd hit his target blind. He thought a howl of agony mingled with the gun thunder half-deafening him, and he watched for the horse to reappear at the far side of the thicket. It dashed into view carrying no rider, and Randy was grimly satisfied.

Sparks were burning his face and neck as he swung down out of the oak. Pink rode up with his bronc; he made a flying mount.

Saginaw, noticing how many cattle were turning back to certain destruction, too bovinely stupid to know there still was a way open to the river, threw his horse around with a mighty tug and headed a bunch of frantic critters. He turned them, with yells and pistol shots, into the only possible trail out of the seething chaparral. Randy, guns reloaded, joined his boss quickly, and the others didn't lag back.

It was a race against time, the walls of flame advancing to surround them with awe-inspiring swiftness. The heat was almost unbearable. Every man's shirt was dark with sweat, and the horses leaped and snorted whenever falling sparks struck them. The efforts of boss and punchers lined most of the back-trailing cattle in the right direction. Slashing rope-ends chased crazy bunch-quitters into the rude column angling riverward.

COWMEN and cattle got through, but the margin of unburned thickets left for their passage was so narrow the men couldn't joke about it afterward with any heartiness. The cattle were splashing in the fetlock-high water when the riders swooped down the embankment, sending the water up in geysers.

"By jeepers! That was tight!" Pat Saginaw tore off smoke-grimed Stetson, leaned and scooped up water on the brim. "Hey, boys, this air is the best you ever breathed, ain't it? Try the water, too—"

Just then a rifle cracked on the Orejana's far bank, snatching the hat out of his hand!

CHAPTER VII

Canyon of Strife

INSTANTLY the eyes of Pat and every man with him jumped to the far river bank, pistol hands clawing for holsters instinctively. Well that the Forked Lightning riders had thought to reload their weapons after burning powder to turn the steers out of the chaparral, for members of the Ortega gang were in position to make a massacre of their crossing.

The opening shot had barked from one of the granite chunks dotting the east bank. Six-shooters belched from other rocks, hitting the water in a geysering hail. Presumably the Ortega gunsters had retreated 'cross river from the brush side when it was perfectly obvious that the scrappy Saginaw bunch wouldn't perish in the fire.

Randy roweled his horse into a splashing trot as he pulled hardware. A puncher to the right of him was seized with a spasm of coughing, reeled out of the saddle. The flames behind backlighted the men caught crossing. Yet to go forward, in the teeth of gunfire from the rock-protected gang, was Forked Lightning's only hope of survival. Slim hope—slim!

Pat Saginaw rode briskly, firing steadily, with gun balanced on bent arm. When he could see a head, a shoulder, an arm—he cracked down. He was raked here and there by passing bullets, but abraded flesh

meant nothing to a rawhide specimen like Pat. He boomed encouragement to his riders, noticing that one man was working to the far bank ahead of them all.

That one was Randy. Guns spewing, he kept to the saddle part way across the stream. He saw the black-garbed figure of Sime Hardin back of a flat-topped boulder! and Sime's gun nearly accounted for Randy before the latter decided to quit the saddle and proceed afoot.

It had occurred to Randy that the boulders in the river bed could serve him and his friends equally as well as the boulders on the bank served the outlaws. He flung off his horse near a rough chunk big enough to hide him as he crouched, pushing fresh cartridges into his guns.

As he unbent, slowly, the cowboy poked his guns around the boulder's irregular side, cut loose at the rock hiding Sime Hardin, whose dark-sleeved arm and shoulder were just then visible. Randy rocked two shots, saw the arm vanish; but there was no outcry, so he couldn't be certain he'd placed those bullets where he intended.

He picked the next nearest boulder for temporary refuge and dashed toward it, slogging through the water fast, guns spitting.

ONE of his saddle-mates, unhorsed, and running for the same bit of cover, collided with Randy; as they staggered apart, Randy slipped down on one knee. The firing from the shore was almost continuous. The other puncher hadn't recovered his balance before a slug hit and spun him around. He fell face down in the water.

Randy rapped lead at the powder flashes along the bank, exulted when a howl of pain went up. He pouched one gun, and with bullets geysering the water around their forms, raised his saddle-mate. In the growing gloom, a hole in the forehead was visible. All over for that cow-crammer. Randy cursed as he let the body slide again, and darted for rock shelter.

Splinters of rock stung his face as he surged up behind the half-submerged boulder. This one didn't afford as much protection as the last, even when he squatted in the river. The distance to the east bank was anyway ten yards; he considered that he had but one chance in a thousand of running the gauntlet of gunfire, especially with the water impeding him.

YET he could not stick out behind that rock indefinitely. He glanced to either side, discovered that his friends who were still in the fight had copied him by leaving the saddle and advancing from boulder to boulder clogging the stream. He could hear Pat roaring somewhere down the line, showing the old-timer's luck was standing by him thus far. Randy counted flashes from three different guns. That meant, counting himself and Pat, there were only four left alive of the original eight.

"Damn them tricky gunnies, here goes for hell or git there!" Randy swore, and with desperation prodding him, guns loaded, he bounded up.

His body weaved as he slapped along, not shooting at first, for the banging of outlaw guns had dwindled in volume, indicating doubtless that many of Ortega's hirelings were at that moment recharging gun cylinders. A break for Randy, for all the Forked Lightning men!

Pat Saginaw had seen Randy taking the lead. He was yelling for the rest to close up behind the two-gun cowboy. Randy plowed lead at a lifting head, and his human target fell sideways from behind a boulder, lay quiet. He let drive again, saw

another gunnie duplicate the performance. Now he was abreast of the sloping bank, scrambling upward, elbows and knees aiding him in the short climb.

As he flung over the lip of the bank he rolled and two bullets spatted into the earth close by. Pat's head popped over the bank farther down, fire stabbing from his outreaching arm.

Randy got his feet under him, darted for the nearest nest of fire-spitting boulders, with six-shooters aroar like a sub-machine-gun. He didn't know it was Sime Hardin he was up against until the latter lurched into view, holding one arm on high, the other sagging at his side. He cried out:

"I cave! You winged me from down in the river, you battlin' fool, and I'm outta cartridges!"

Randy's guns were silenced on the instant. He plunged the muzzle of one against the gun chief's belt-buckle, searched him for a possible concealed weapon. But two empty Colts, in holsters suspended from cartridgeless crossed belts, were all that Randy found.

AND Randy became aware that the reverberating crash of blazing triggers were dying away, superseded by commands to "han's zup," "reach high," and "drop them smokers." The voices giving orders were those of Pat and his surviving crew, and Randy exulted at the signs betokening victory for his side. Surely they had earned that victory, with blood and gallant striving against odds.

He was tying Hardin's bent arms at his back when Pat sidled over, driving two men at gun's point.

"I see you got the gun boss!" Pat observed, herding his specimens to a halt.

"Chief hellion—next to Ortega, yeah!" Randy retorted. "It cost us plenty to win this jack-pot, old mossyhorn! You ain't corraled Manuel, by any chance?"

Before Saginaw could reply, Sime Hardin said sullenly, "He ain't takin' no long chances with his lemon-colored hide! Ortega planned the fire trap, figurin' you'd have to pop brush to make another gather of steers after—well, why shouldn't I admit it, I'm only a hired man!—after he poisoned that first Saginaw herd. Hell, but he's a revengeful cuss!"

"You're tellin' me!" snorted Pat. "Listen, Sime Hardin," he edged closer in the gloom, but did not relax the drop he held on the two gunless desperadoes; "your boss, that's so careful of his own skin, is cached in a hideaway in yonder mountain, ain't he? Takin' his ease and comfort while you fellows risk your lives in a losin' fight. You can't beat me—and you can't turn back the steel rails—you'll allow that's true, eh?"

STOOP-SHOULDERED Hardin did not reply at once.

"Forked Lightnin' brand seems to have the devil's own luck," he said finally. "And I knowed from the first it was a madman's idea to battle the railroad—but I live by my guns and Ortega could pay my price—so I sided him!"

"You're a-goin' to lead us to that hideaway," Saginaw declared abruptly. "I want to cross guns with Ortega—and say, you've got a beef herd in that hideout, ain'tcha? Triangle cattle, to feed the boys?"

If the darkness hadn't prevented, Randy and Pat would have seen the black-garbed gunfighter's eyes widen in surprise.

"Yeah, the cattle's there," Hardin admitted, "though I dunno how you figured it out. Enough of 'em to replace your poisoned herd, Saginaw. Well, gents, I'm only drawin' gun wages. I've done what I could to

stop you fellows—and lost. There's no reason I can see to make more trouble for myself, so follow me to the canyon we're camped at. It won't cost you a cent!"

"But it'll cost you a fatal puncture if you steer us wrong!" Randy tucked in. "You guys are all gallows fruit, anyway! Where's your horses?"

Sime Hardin didn't argue the point. He told them where the horses of the gang were corraled, in a near-by cul-de-sac. He had decided it was no part of his verbal contract with the Mexican rancher to protect the latter when the opposing force was in a position to dictate terms.

The devious route to Ortega's hideout consumed an hour of steady saddle whacking. Man hunters might have searched for days, weeks, and never have located the outlaw camp.

The lowing of cattle first apprised Saginaw's outfit that they were approaching their goal. Randy straightened in the saddle, glanced at the unarmed Sime.

"Yeah," the gun boss nodded answer to the unspoken question. "We'll soon be there—around that next bend. There's a lookout—"

He did not finish. Rifle flame stabbed the darkness; a bullet whistled warningly over Randy's head. The lookout man was on the job, apparently had discerned that Sime Hardin had unwanted visitors and had cut loose without the preliminary challenge of a man on sentry go.

RANDY snatched out a gun, sent lead snarling at the spot where the rifle had flared. He regretted the fact that the guard's quick discovery of enemy approach made impossible a surprise attack on Ortega. Sime Hardin had said there were a dozen hand-picked gunsters acting bodyguard for the fugitive Triangle boss.

Randy's shot in the dark, fired defensively to stop further rifle play, evidently missed the blind target. The click of the guard's boot-heels on flinty ground could be heard as the gun echoes thinned away, indicating his retreat around the bend to rouse the Ortega camp.

"Got to go slow here!" Randy said over his shoulder to Saginaw.

They rounded the bend, four captives and four captors, and faced a fire-lighted canyon head, seemingly abandoned. The sounds of the cattle were clearer, coming from the canyon's upper end, but still the critters weren't visible. Must be in some natural rock corral. Nor was there sign of a single enemy.

YET the Saginaw bunch had small doubt that plenty of guns were being silently trained on them, hammers cocked until they should ride past the fire.

"A dead-fall," Randy remarked, eyes frosty. "They're hid among them roundhead boulders layin' both sides the canyon floor. Only one thing to do: Sime, hold your bronc quiet. I'm mountin' behind you and they'll have to hit you first—"

"Good idear!" Saginaw declared. "There's a man for each of us and two prisoners extra who'll have to be tied up to keep 'em outta mischief."

"That's a dirty deal!" snarled Hardin. "Us *hombres* won't have a chance."

"I reckon we ought to be sorry for you, seein' how gentle you treated us!" Randy sneered. He swung on behind the man in black and led the dash into the lighted canyon, forcing Hardin to guide the horse while he, Randy, kept one six-shooter jammed against Sime's back, the other held to fog at anyone shooting at them.

Pat, hairpinned behind the saddle of another outlaw, was giving his attention to the left side of the trail. Pink Holliday and prisoner flanked Randy; the other puncher and a prisoner were behind Saginaw.

A rifle cracked from the canyon's end, lifting Hardin's Stetson. The throaty music of another rifle joined in, its flash spotting the darkness only a few yards distant from the first one. Strangely the rocks were silent; only the rifles at the upper end of the canyon continued to lash away.

Randy was puzzled, but he jabbed with the spurs, jabbed with the smoke-iron pressing Hardin's spine.

"Straight at that guy, Sime; the one we're in line with!" he barked.

Hardin writhed, ducked his head. He believed it was only a matter of seconds when some former pal of his would cut him down ruthlessly. A bullet from the hidden Winchester raked his cheek.

"Hell!" shouted Sime. "I'll ketch it front or back, sure, if—"

He caught it "front," a bullet boring between his eyes. He swayed, fell. Randy could now see that the sharpshooter seeking his life was behind a roundhead at the rim of a wide depression in the canyon floor. In that depression the cattle were bellowing, stirring with clack of horns and hoofs as their excitement grew, but apparently unable to get out.

RANDY slid over the bounding horse's tail, and as the animal swerved he plunged flat on his belly, fired at a head poking upward from the rounded top of the boulder. A scream mingled with the gun-roaring echoes. The puncher leaped up and around the boulder, focusing a pair of hoglegs on a man who lay on his back.

The outlaw was dying. Randy kicked his Winchester away and bent over. "Where the hell's Ortega, the rest of the gang? You two guardin' the canyon alone?"

He got the desired information by slow degrees, using a potent pint from his saddle bag to keep the fellow alive and talking. By then Saginaw, Pink and the other puncher had trudged over to listen, all of them puzzled at finding just two outlaws and the cattle in Ortega's hideaway.

THE explanation was that Manuel Ortega had decided, after sending Hardin and gunmen to trap the brush poppers, himself to attack the practically defenseless railroad camp. Ortega had been sure that Hardin would succeed in getting rid of the Forked Lightning outfit that afternoon; and he, Ortega, would show the railroaders that he still had fangs, though an outcast. He had taken eight men with him.

"Manuel's haywire, a mad dog—but mad dogs do plenty harm sometimes!" Randy rose from his knees. It had just struck him that Mary Doyle would be endangered by that raid, and he was wild to fork a saddle.

Ortega, according to his henchman, hadn't left till after sundown. It wasn't possible to prevent the outlaws' descent on the unsuspecting railroad camp; but if the jerries and the railroad "bulls" had stuck it out fighting, there was a chance Saginaw's crew would find some few alive.

But Mary Doyle—

"C'mon," urged Randy in a suddenly savage tone, "we ain't got any time to waste here. We can come back and get these cows—if there's any jerries left to chew on a hunk of beef."

The two outlaws who had escaped disaster riding with Pink and his saddle-mate, were trussed up and dropped to keep company with the

other two at the canyon-head. Then mounted on their own broncs, each rider taking along an outlaw's mount to change to make the best time possible to the T. P. and A. camp, Pat and his three punchers galloped clear of the hideaway.

CHAPTER VIII

Gunriders' Jamboree

WHEN the saddle-whackers came out at the head of a winding canyon, they faced a great void of star-pierced gloom. But the darkness was not alone relieved by starshine, they quickly saw. What appeared to be a short row of campfires dotted the plain, far across the river; but the men knew instantly it was not campfires at which they looked.

"Burnin' railroad cars!" Randy shouted. "That's about where the T. P. and A.'s located. Here we go!"

They were heedless of running into ambush of returning raiders, for it appeared as if the railroad camp were still being beseiged by Ortega and the gunnies under his personal leadership. Finding that the extra horses impeded progress, the desperate rangemen cast them loose, rocketed down the mountain, thrashed across the rock-choked Orejana bottom.

The horses were forced to a killing pace—but they got their riders to the scene of the raid while the flames still roared and crackled, and gave hideous illumination to a fearful drama.

All about galloped horsemen with spurting guns, most of their bullets smashing into the fire-enwrapped diner, where pistol and rifle smoked. Guns were crashing from one of the burning cross-tie heaps, and the raiders did not forget to answer these shots.

Randy and his companions drew rein an instant. A man's voice pierced the thunder of guns, emanating from the beleaguered dining car, which apparently was the only car in the string wherein railroad folk had taken refuge:

"Hey, Ortega, there's two women here! Hold fire till they get out—then finish us men if you can! For God's sake—" It was the construction boss talking.

Shrilly the voice of Ortega answered. "*Señor,* I am no longer Ortega, the rancher—I am Ortega, the outlaw! You have driven me from my home and there is no mercy in my heart. Would you rather trust your women to Ortega, the outlaw, than to the fire which consumes quickly?"

"You devil!" screamed the construction boss, fully comprehending.

Randy swore under his breath and gripped Pat's arm. "We oughta drive them hellions away before takin' Mary and her mother off the car—but there's too many outlaws and the car's burnin' too fast. Pink, you and Jimmy join them fellows at the tie pile. Lead 'em out and give Ortega's bunch hell!"

HE was off like a shot himself as he spoke, his guns spitting red hell to right and left. Horsemen dashed out of his path, shooting back at him. Saginaw was seen and recognized, his name yelled fiercely by Ortega, who rode swiftly down the right of way, his gun clanging at Pat.

Pat answered his shots, tried to lift his enemy out of the saddle en route to that burning diner—somehow both rangemen missed. Pat was intent on saving that woman, the mother of Mary Doyle, whom he never had met. When a slug slapped into his left shoulder, he barely noticed it.

Braving bullets and flame, Randy

and Pat drew near the rear platform, where several figures crouched. Randy knew Mary, though her head and face were partly covered by a wet dish towel; the other woman, similarly protected, must be Mrs. Doyle. A man in a once white cap and apron, the cook, stood behind the women, balancing a sawed-off shotgun. His watering eyes peered at the cowman over the top of a water-drenched bandanna tied across nose and mouth.

Shots were coming through the car windows, at the other end of the car. The construction boss and a couple of his men were striving against odds they never could have surmounted, so that Mary and her mother might be rescued from the rear platform.

But the raiders, astonished at the sudden appearance of the Forked Lightning horsemen, speedily acted to circumvent the plan of rescue. Lead began to gouge the car wall, where the inner door opened on the platform. The cook opened up with his sawed-off gun and the horses jumped.

"Mary!" yelled Randy. He freed a foot from the stirrup, extending the hand he had temporarily relieved of the weight of a six-gun.

Quick-witted Mary Doyle flung down the steps. Her slippered foot tucked itself in the box stirrup and she leaned against the cowboy as his arm went around her. A bullet from one of the gang riders knocked Randy's hat off his head.

RANDY, his left hand about Mary, fired at a man with smoking pistol racing to head him and the rescued girl. The puncher was guiding his horse by knee pressure, straight as he could go for the outer darkness which spelled temporary safety for the girl standing in his stirrup, clinging with arms thrown about his body.

At the bark of his gun, the man riding at him pitched sidelong, turned up spurred heels while his face ploughed the turf. Randy kept his horse going strong, though it was nearly on its last legs—but the darkness, the sheltering dark, lay just ahead. The wet towel had dropped from Mary's head and face, somewhere along the route. She was gazing fearfully behind, and suddenly gave vent to a half-muffled scream which disturbed young Coultras almost as much as a bullet through an arm or leg might have done.

"WHAT?" he demanded, hearing shouts of triumph above the hoof thunder, the gun thunder.

"Let me down, let me down!" Mary cried hysterically. "And go back. Your friend was shot out of the saddle. They're riding him down—and mother's foot must be caught in the stirrup.

"The horse is running—dragging—her—"

"Holy cow!" Randy slipped a finger through the trigger-guard of his Colt, seized the slack rein and pulled up. The girl swung off as he pivoted his horse. Her throat felt constricted; a white hand fluttered up to it.

"Go on!" she burst into emotion-choked speech. "I'll stay back—where those shooting devils won't see me!"

Randy's spurs punched deep. The horse staggered, and he feared it was going to earth. But the game pony would go until its heart literally burst!

Old Saginaw sat on the ground pumping shots at horsemen tearing toward him. He might have suffered his death-wound, but he still was able to deal death, for riders were reeling. Randy's inclination was to dash to Pat's side, naturally—Pat needed him as never before. But the

woman jerking along the ground at the end of a stirrup-leather, the victim of a crazy bronc, must be succored first—or there would be no use in riding to her aid at all.

Randy spurred to head the body-dragging horse. Without much trouble he cornered it, and anchored the brute to his own saddle-horn, sliding off to the ground. He stooped, while just a hundred yards away gun battle raged; and, cool-headed, with deft fingers, worked the imprisoned foot loose. He carried Mrs. Doyle out of range of the nervous bronc's hoofs, noticing the foot that slipped through Pat's stirrup-iron dangled—the ankle was broken. But what was a broken ankle, some cuts and bruises, compared to death? He exulted in the thought of the joy that would be Mary Doyle's when he returned.

Randy placed the fortunately unconscious woman across the saddle, holding her there. He needed to walk the horses but halfway to the spot where he had left the girl. Mary came up to him with wide eyes in a pallid face, speechless. She couldn't ask the question whose answer spelled great joy or untold sorrow.

"She's alive, not bad hurt except for a broken ankle, I believe!" he announced, handing her the reins of his mount. "Quick, Mary, lead 'em back there in the dark, take your ma off and see what you can do for her. Me, I'm goin' back to help Pat and my pals!"

HE whirled with Mary's words of gratitude barely reaching him, loading his guns as he headed back. The firing had reached a crescendo pitch, and there was as yet plenty of illumination from the burning cars to do accurate gunwork. Ortega's gang seemed to have been crowded in a gradually narrowing circle by men on foot from the dining car and that cross-tie pile which had been erupting defensive shots when the rescuers had first arrived on the scene.

Pat—to Randy's immense relief—was moving, trying to stand. He had gun in fist and was roaring as Randy drew nearer:

"Fly at it, Manuel! Bust a cap with me, man to man, and you won't have to ride no more lookin' for revenge—one of us'll rack his chips, maybe both!"

AND now the two-gun puncher saw the Mexican cattleman, a demoniac figure on a black horse, charging with smoking gun. Straight at Pat, never meaning to give his one-time range friend a break, he intended but to kill the wounded man, ride him down before Pat could straighten his legs, get his gun up.

"Git off your hoss—" Pat's pluck was unbeaten. He reeled out of the path of the charging, wild-eyed bronc. The equally wild-eyed Mexican cut loose with streaks of flame. But he shrank in the saddle simultaneously, for Pat's lead bit him hard.

"This ain't no ghost gun pumpin' at you, Mex, they're real bullets—feel 'em dig in?" the indomitable Pat was bellowing as he flopped down.

The Mexican straightened a little, spun his horse to charge back and across the spot where Saginaw had fallen. Randy's guns lifted; he fairly cut the Mexican out of the saddle. Ortega fell headlong with his horse, never moved after he crashed.

"Don't make so much fuss, high pockets!" snorted Pat, as Randy was canvassing his outstretched, bulky form for bullet sign in fatal quarters. "Hell, I'm only hit slight. Where's Mrs. Doyle at?"

Saginaw didn't know she had been dragged, for Ortega and his gang

had jumped the old-timer as he swayed from his horse. Randy told all that was necessary to quiet him, then suddenly realized the shooting had stopped. He glanced up to find men ringing him and Pat about, reached for the guns he had shoved in his holsters.

"Don'tcha recognize your friends no more?" queried a powder-grimed youth in the voice of Pink Holliday. "Manuel's been on his last gun jamboree; his gunnies is either killed or prisoners. And here's the ol' deputy sheriff hisself, from Barranca, to take in the said prisoners."

"'Lo," Randy nodded at the acting sheriff. "How'd you get here?"

"Hossback," grinned the officer. "Me and a couple town boys happened to be scoutin' around this side the Orejana for Manuel when he tore into the railroad camp. We got behind them cross-ties, but it was pretty damned hot after them gunnies set the pile afire. We couldn't 'a' won out if you fellows hadn't chanced along."

"Wasn't no *chance* fetched us; we'll explain that later." Randy looked around the ring of faces, his own tension relaxing, a grin spreading. "Where," he asked the grimy construction boss, "the jerries hidin' out? I ain't seen one yet—"

"Sent 'em all back to Dobe Wells by first train over the new spurs," the railroad man replied, "about four o'clock. We were out of meat, since that beef herd of yours was poisoned, and good beef is the chief item on their menu, as you know.

"Cowboy, we sure put in some hours in hell! If these cars hadn't been out-of-date style, with a lot of wood construction, the fire wouldn't have caught hold like it did. Sure thought my time had come, but what worried me most was Mary and her mother—what's become of 'em?" he broke off suddenly, wiping dirt and sweat from his face on his shirt sleeve. He still carried the rifle he had used against the raiders.

"THAT reminds me," Randy stood up. "I got to go see Mary and her ma right away." He glanced down at Pat, who detected something in the cowpuncher's good-looking brown face which caused the old-timer to lift on one elbow. "Now, Pat, be good—"

"High-pockets, I can see romance in your eye," the big rangeman rumbled. "Go ahead, tell the girl what you think of her; and if she don't 'yes' you, she's out of her head. You can tell her this, too: you got swell chances on Forked Lightnin', the best a cowboy ever had to get spliced.

"And Mrs. Doyle, she won't have to cook no more for the railroad—if she changes her name to Saginaw. I'll attend to that part when I see the lady herself. Yessir, she can be a real lady, livin' at the ranch and with a town house to boot, me ownin' so much of Barranca she can plumb take her pick of a site. Hell with bein' a lonely bach from now on—"

"Pat, you're hell on wheels—but thanks!" Randy wheeled and strode away toward the darkness sheltering Mary Doyle and her mother, and the chiming of his spurs was like some song of happiness that he was hearing for the first time. For Randy believed with all his heart that Mary would say "yes," if not tonight, then tomorrow.

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Buckaroo Deputy

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Top-Hand Thompson, Slick Jasper of the Mesas, Barges in to Loot the Cochise County Cowboys' Reunion in this Rip-Snorting Rodeo Yarn

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An Exciting Bucky Dorn Story

By CHUCK MARTIN

Author of "Gun Daddy," "Grass for Water," etc.

SHERIFF "Old John" Tobin stormed out of the little adobe building which served as office and jail. His high boot-heels sprayed gravel as he leaped to the narrow street that crowded right up to the door-sill. The old sheriff faced Jim Bowen, who leaned against the tie-

rack in front of his general store, and his bearded lips were working beneath the drooping longhorn mustaches as he shot a question in his growling baritone.

"Where's that wuthless Bucky Dorn? Him a-runnin' off with trouble starin' us smack in th' face?"

Jim Bowen calmly pointed a fat finger in the direction of a corral down the street where a dust cloud was rising. Shouting cowboys could be seen perched on the top rails with boot-heels hooked over the middle bars. The thud of hammering hoofs could be plainly heard as the dust cloud became thicker.

"Bucky's down there showin' th' boys how tuh ride a outlaw," said the storekeeper. "I hear him say as how he was goin' tuh ride him straight up!"

"He'd ought tuh be in a rodeo, an' he ain't such a much at that," growled Old John. "As a depitty, he's plumb wuthless!"

Jim Bowen grinned as the sheriff stalked toward the corral at the end of the street with fire in his faded blue eyes. For all of his abuse of the young deputy, the whole of Cochise County knew that the sheriff loved the dare-devil youngster who had been known as "Bucky" ever since he was big enough to straddle a fuzz-tail.

Bowen took one look at the empty store, after which he followed to see the fun.

SO interested were they in the contest within the corral that none of the loungers noticed the sheriff as he stomped up and peered through the bars. A slender cowboy was riding a pitching buckskin, sitting the saddle with a confident grace that brought a gleam of admiration to Old John's eyes in spite of his anger.

The buckskin squealed as he sunfished and crow-hopped in a mad endeavor to unseat the rider. But the red-headed youngster merely grinned as he sat straight up in the saddle and gave the bucker his head.

"Scratch him, Bucky!" yelled one of the cowboys. "Show us how you go to town!"

The red-headed buckaroo did not use the spur on his boot, but he leaned across to groove the arched neck of the sweating outlaw with his thumb. The buckskin leaped high in the air and swapped ends before his bunched feet hit the ground. Then he suddenly stopped and stood with head hanging as his sides heaved from exhaustion.

THE slim rider slid easily to the ground, and his hand jerked the cinch as soon as his feet had hit the dust. The head of the tired bucker followed him jerkily as he walked across the corral with the saddle on his arm.

"Hey you, Bucky! What in tarnation yuh doin' down yere when they's work agoin'?"

Bucky Dorn grinned as he faced the irate sheriff. Then he hastened to the officer's side as he caught a fleeting look of worry on the face of Old John.

"I'm sorry I was galavantin', Ole John," he said softly. "What's up?"

"Yuh should have stayed a buckaroo," the sheriff growled. "I made a mistake when I took you for my depitty, an' yuh ain't such a much as a masher nohow. I could ride that buckskin myself!"

"It's Top-hand Thompson," said Bucky Dorn. "Else you wouldn't have hawsses on yore mind so much, ole-timer!"

"Let's git down to th' office," the sheriff growled. "Yeah, it's Top-hand agin!"

Seated in the bull-hide chair with his feet upon the scarred desk, the old sheriff glared at a letter in his hand before handing it over. A worried crease grooved deeply in his

forehead as he drummed nervously with his fingers.

"Read her," he growled. "See if you gits th' same meanin' that I did!"

Bucky Dorn studied the message for a moment.

John Tobin,
Sheriff Cochise County, Arizona.
Top-hand Thompson heading your way to ride in the Cowboys' Reunion. Watch for another clean-up.
(Signed) Fred Jackson,
Sheriff Gila County.

THE smooth brow of the young deputy was creased with thought as he read the short message aloud. Then he stared at it with unseeing eyes that held a faraway look as he turned to gaze out through the open door. Sheriff Tobin broke the silence.

"Mebbe yo're thinkin'," he suggested sarcastically. "Even if yuh do have tuh have somethin' tuh think with!"

"It don't take no thinkin'," said Bucky Dorn. "She's as plain as th' nose on yore face, an' that's shore plain enough!"

The sheriff rubbed the insulted member angrily.

"But anyway," Bucky continued, "this here missive tells us a heap!"

"I'm waitin'," the sheriff reminded. "I done got it all figgered out, an' I jess want tuh see if you tally with me!"

"Mind tellin' me how you reads th' sign?" the deputy asked. "Seein' as how yo're th' boss an' all!"

"Top-hand is goin' to try tuh win th' cash prizes at th' Reunion," said the sheriff. "If he don't win, then him an' his two pals figger on robbin' th' man as does!"

"I figgers yo're wrong," said Bucky Dorn. "Lightnin' seldom strikes twice in th' same place, an' that's what he did over at Bowie, only they couldn't prove nothin' on him. He'll work it different this time!"

OldJohn Tobin snorted. "Th' Sagebresh Sherlock," he sneered. "Perceed with yore deductions, feller!"

"I been thinkin' what I'd do if I was crooked," the deputy admitted.

"I've tried tuh keep yuh honest by makin' you my depitty," said the sheriff. "But seein' as how yore mind takes devious trails, go ahead an' tell me jest how you read th' sign yore way!"

"If a gent wins th' buckin' contest, he gits his money regardless, don't he?" the youngster asked.

"Shore does," Tobin agreed. "We're honest around Cochise!"

"What if th' purse was stole before th' contest, an' then this Top-hand won besides?" the deputy asked. "Say, supposin' one of his pals stole it while ever'body was watchin' th' fuzz-tails do their stuff?"

The old sheriff glared at the deputy while he scratched his bald head with the same hand that removed the droopy Stetson.

"He'd git jess twice as much *dinero*," he conceded at last. "But don't forget that th' money would be in Jim Bowen's new safe!"

"Along with uh lot of other money," said Bucky Dorn. "Me bein' in th' buckin' contest, you couldn't do much all by yore own self!"

THE gnarled hand of the sheriff reached for the old Colt laying on the desk. He grabbed it by the barrel, and for a moment the young deputy thought his superior was going to throw it.

"I should ought tuh knock yore brains out, yuh young snipe," the sheriff growled. "I'd do it too if it wasn't for you bein' entered in that ridin' contest. You tend tuh winnin' that there event an' leave th' sheriffin' tuh me!"

"Top-hand is some shakes as uh buckaroo," said the deputy. "I think I kin beat him, but jess th' same it's goin' tuh be a battle. I'll be down

there beatin' him in th' ridin' pen while you watch things at this end!"

"I'm goin' tuh see that ridin' if it's th' last thing I does on earth," growled Old John. "It's my business tuh be where I kin watch that slick jasper!"

"An' while yo're foolin' yore time away, his pals will be cleanin' house up here," said Bucky Dorn. "Mebbe I better withdraw so we kin have some law an' order in Cochise durin' th' Reunion!"

The sheriff started to answer, and then his boots hit the plank floor as he pointed through the open door. The young deputy followed the pointing finger, and his blue eyes narrowed as he watched the solitary horseman riding toward them.

"It's Top-hand Thompson, an' he's playin' th' game on his own this time," said the sheriff.

"Looks like it," admitted the deputy. "But yuh never kin tell, oletimer!"

The approaching rider was a tall, loosely built man of about thirty, clad in regulation range garb. A low-slung .45 was conspicuous on the right leg of his bull-hide chaps, but it was the silver-mounted riding gear that attracted the attention of the watching men.

GOOD riding gear usually meant a good rider, because the pay of an ordinary puncher was nearly always spent in riotous living. Such a saddle as Thompson was riding would cost a thousand dollars, or two years' pay for the average waddy.

The tall rider swung down at the hitch-rack in front of Jim Bowen's general store. He disappeared inside without so much as a glance toward the two men in the sheriff's office next door. Bucky Dorn jerked his head silently at the sheriff and wandered in after Thompson. Inside the store he stopped at a case of knives where he could hear the conversation.

"Yo're Jim Bowen," said Thompson. "I'm Top-hand Thompson; winner of th' Cowboys' Reunion over at Gila. Thought I'd drop in an' git acquainted, 'cause I expect tuh win this one too!"

Jim Bowen spat noisily in a corner while he looked the tall rider over slowly. Then he jerked his head toward the deputy at the front of the store, and his paunchy stomach quivered as he chuckled.

"THERE'S th' man yuh got tuh beat," he said. "Th' best rider in th' hull county!"

"Yeah; th' county," said Thompson. "Hit hain't such a big county, an' I beat th' best workin' waddies over at Gila. This here won't be no different!"

"Yuh come near not gittin' yore prize money over there, I hear," said Bowen.

"I got my money," said Thompson. "It wasn't my hard luck because some robbers busted in th' sheriff's office an' robbed th' safe while I was ridin'. They made me up another purse!"

"Things will be different here," said Bowen confidently. "I got th' best safe in th' county right here in th' store, an' all th' money stays right there ontil after th' ridin' contest. After that we pays off!"

"Guess I'll amble down to th' hotel," said Thompson. "Take good care of my money, Bowen!"

He swaggered insolently to the front of the store where he stopped to look the young deputy up and down. Bucky Dorn went on with his inspection of knives in the case, and Thompson passed with a sneer on his face. Jim Bowen waddled forward with a worried expression in his eyes.

"That gent will bear watchin', Bucky," he said. "He's too dang shore of hisself!"

"Yeah," the deputy admitted. "I been thinkin' about him, Jim. Me

an Ole John will keep tabs on him for a while. Don't you worry none about it!"

"There's fifteen hundred in th' safe, along with about eight hundred of my own money," said Bowen. "An' nobody knows th' combination but me!"

"I got tuh git down there to th' corral an' top off a bucker for practice," said Bucky. "Seein' as th' show starts tuhmorrow, an' th' best rider in th' whole State is here to carry off th' winnin's!"

RIDERS from the surrounding ranches were pouring into the little town of Cochise for the Cowboys' Reunion. Unlike the modern rodeo, the contestants had to be registered riders who worked within the boundaries of the State of Arizona. Professionals were barred, and one of the strict rules of the Contest Committee was plainly advertised throughout the county.

"Our horses and riders have never met before!"

Top-hand Thompson grinned as he read the sign that stretched across the street in front of the holding corrals at the south end of town. He grinned again as he saw the old sheriff watching him, and then he sauntered forward to climb the bars of the riding pen.

Old John Tobin continued to watch the tall rider from the corner of his eye, and his glance wandered to the paint horse that carried the silver-mounted saddle of the cowboy. As far as Tobin knew, Thompson had no friends in Cochise. The sheriff had watched all strangers riding in for the Reunion, and he was sure that Thompson had talked to none of them. He finally turned away and rode back to his office.

He frowned as he sat in the old bull-hide chair with his boots on the desk. He had been warned that something was going to happen, but there was nothing he could put a finger on. He jerked his shoulders savagely as he tried to rid himself of an uneasy feeling, after which he walked into Jim Bowen's general store. Everything looked all right, so he mounted his horse and rode down to the grounds where the Reunion was about to start.

He watched listlessly as the riders within the enclosure roped and tied calves in record time. He yawned lazily when the steer riders galloped through the dust holding to the single cinch, and even the bull-dogging contest failed to arouse his interest. Once more he glanced over the crowd which was noisily applauding every fall, and then spurred his horse and loped back to the office.

The main event of the Reunion would soon begin, but Old John decided that he would take the advice of his young deputy and stay close to Jim Bowen and the money in the safe.

NOT a man was in sight as he swung down from the saddle in front of the little adobe jail. He could hear the shouting down at the corrals, and he pushed back the droopy Stetson from his bald head as he stepped across the door sill. The next moment he stiffened as he felt something hard poke into his spine, and then a growling voice sounded behind him.

"Git them dew-claws up!"

With the gun boring into his back, there was nothing else Old John could do except obey the command. Slowly his hands rose to the level of his shoulders. The gun was plucked from his holster as the same growling voice spoke close to his ear.

"Put them hands behind yuh!" There was a sharp click as he obeyed, and the sheriff swore softly when he realized that he had been handcuffed with his own bracelets. His eyes were becoming accustomed to the

gloom of the office, and he turned to face his captor.

The fellow was short and stocky, with a blue bandana covering the lower part of his face. The old sheriff racked his memory for some clue that would lead to the identity of the bandit, but the short man smiled sneeringly as he waved toward the single cell that was located at the rear of the office.

After locking the door, he left the office without further conversation. He was still grinning broadly as he stepped into Jim Bowen's store—and then a soft voice caused him to stiffen as he reached for the gun on his leg.

"Reach for heaven!"

A slim cowboy was standing just behind him and to one side, and he could see the gun threatening him from a steady brown hand. Something had gone wrong. His partner had been guarding the fat storekeeper when he had entered the sheriff's office not more than five minutes before, and now Pecos Cummings was nowhere in sight.

"Git them hands up, Red Riggs!"

Riggs' jaw fell as the slim cowboy called his name, and then he galvanized into action. Like a snarling cat he threw himself to one side as his right hand shot down toward the gun on his thigh.

A BULLET smashed into his shoulder to hurl him backward as the gun roared behind him. He sat up foolishly as Bucky Dorn menaced him with the smoking Colt.

"Git up, an' put yore hands behind yore back," the deputy whispered softly. *"Pronto!"*

"I'll bleed tuh death," the prisoner whined.

"Shore yuh will," the deputy agreed. "I been watchin' you an' Pecos all mornin'. I got him handcuffed back yonder where he won't do no harm!"

"Wait ontil Top-hand hears about this," Riggs snarled.

"That's jess what Pecos said," the deputy grinned. "Th' both of yuh slipped, an' Top-hand is th' sort of gent to let you an' Pecos go to th' pen while he gets th' gravy!"

He took a pigging string from around his waist and expertly threw a series of hitches around the wrists of the wounded man. Then he herded him to the rear of the store, where Jim Bowen was guarding the handcuffed prisoner.

A BLOOD-STAINED handkerchief was tied around the fat storekeeper's head, but he chuckled as Bucky Dorn unfastened one of the cuffs from his prisoner's wrists, and clinked it firmly around the right wrist of Red Riggs.

"It's a mighty good thing for me that yore hunch was right," Bowen said to Dorn. "That short *hombre* clouted me before I could turn around, and they were trying to make me open the safe when you looked through th' window!"

"It was plumb easy when Red Riggs left here tuh sneak into th' sheriff's office," said Bucky Dorn. "You keep yore eyes on these two bad men till I runs over tuh the jail tuh see jest what Red did to Ole John!"

With high-heels clattering on the floor, the young deputy raced to the office next door. Coming from the bright sunlight into the gloom of the adobe made it difficult to see at first, but he grinned as the voice of Old John Tobin roared at him from the cell room.

"Come back yere an' let me outen this stinken' jail! Is that you, Bucky?"

"It's me, Sheriff!" He was still grinning as he threw the door back and opened the cell door with a key taken from the pocket of his overalls. The raging old sheriff crawled out

and held out his manacled hands.

"Open these yere bracelets," he snapped.

"You got th' key in yore pocket?" Bucky asked.

"Naw," the sheriff growled. "That outlaw tooken it!"

"Let's get over to th' store," said Bucky. "I got both them *hombres* over there!"

OLD JOHN looked up and down the deserted street before stepping out, and then he rushed across the patch of sunlight with ridiculous haste. Bucky Dorn was right at his heels as he pounded across the floor of the long store to confront the scowling bandits.

"Where's th' key to these cuffs?" he demanded.

"I throwed it out through th' window," said Red Riggs. "I didn't figger on this slim jasper cuttin' our sign to spoil th' play!"

The sheriff groaned. It would be like hunting for a needle in a haystack to try finding the key in the head-high weeds behind the jail. Bucky Dorn stirred uneasily as a muffled roar came to them from the direction of the corrals at the far end of the street.

"I'm late for th' ridin' contest now," he muttered. "I got tuh git down there, Ole John!"

"Yo're my depitty an' yuh got tuh stay right yere," the sheriff answered quickly. Then his old face softened up. "Stick my right-hand gun in my fist, an' then yuh hit leather," he growled softly. "Yuh jess got tuh win that Buckin' event, Bucky!"

The slim deputy did as he was directed, after which he edged toward the door.

"You an' Jim won't have no trouble holdin' these desperadoes, an' we might have another one by th' time I git back!"

He tried to hide a grin as he glanced at John from the corner of his eye. Then he went pounding across the floor to the front door. He made the saddle in one long leap, and they heard his horse's hoofs pounding as he galloped toward the riding pen. His boot-heels ground a furrow in the dust even before the bunched hoofs slid to a stop, and he ran through the gate just as the judge began to announce the big event of the day.

A roar went up from the assembled cowboys as the slender deputy raced toward the saddling chute. Top-hand Thompson watched him as he turned over the heavy saddle, and he scowled when Bucky Dorn began to run his fingers over the cinches and stirrup straps. The deputy looked up in time to catch the expression in the narrowed eyes, and he dumped the saddle over into a corner as a rider from the Cross Bows ranch came into the pen with another hull.

"Thanks, Broncho," he said to the puncher. "Some skunk done unlaced th' right-side rawhide in that saddle there, an' th' same polecat done burned one of th' cinches nearly half in two. It's a good thing we left this ole oak right yere where he could work on it while you was lookin' out for my reg-lar saddle!"

"You talkin' at me?" Thompson demanded.

"Ever' brand fits th' iron what made it," the deputy answered quietly. "Call yoreself names, Top-hand!"

"BUCKY DORN will now try tuh ride Rainbow!"

All three men jerked erect as the loud voice of the announcer came to them across the dusty pen. With one last glance at the scowling Thompson, Bucky Dorn followed the Cross Bows puncher into the saddling chute. Three minutes later he waited for the signal that would send him hurtling into the arena.

The heavy saddle was tightly cinched to a hammer-headed roan outlaw that had never been ridden. Broncho was holding the ugly head snubbed down, ready to snatch the blind away at the signal.

"Th' Buckaroo Depitty!" the announcer yelled. "Let 'er buck, cowboy!"

The gate banged back as the cowboy threw off the snubbing rope and jerked the jumper-blind. The great roan came out clawing, and Bucky Dorn sat straight up in the saddle and let the horse have its head. The crowd shouted when the roan threw himself sideways, swapping ends with a convulsive jerk.

The body of the Buckaroo Deputy seemed made of steel and rubber as he met each shock, and as the bunched hoofs jarred to the ground, he grooved the squalling horse with his thumb.

The roan snorted as he leaped into the air and raced toward the poles of the corral. Cowboys on the top rail scattered like quail as that tornado charged down upon them. Bucky Dorn lifted his left leg to prevent a smashed bone, and the roan suddenly swerved, arching his back at the same time. The deputy swayed as he met the trick with a grin. Then he leaned over and again grooved the sweating neck.

THE crowd was yelling as the roan settled down to straight bucking, and Bucky Dorn reached into the pocket of his shirt for the makings. Up and down bucked the tiring roan as his rider poured a brownie and rolled it with one hand. Bucky scratched a match with a thumb nail, and as he blew a cloud of smoke from his lungs, the roan lowered his head until it nearly touched the ground.

The animal's sides were heaving as the deputy touched him with the heel on his right boot. To the judges' stand they rode, where Bucky tipped his Stetson; and then to the saddling chute where he dismounted from the weary bucker.

"Yo're a trick rider, ain't yuh?" sneered Top-hand.

"Well, I've took th' fust two tricks," the deputy answered quietly.

THE tall rider was still puzzling over the remark when the announcer called his ride, and Bucky Dorn grinned tantalizingly from the top rail of the chute. But his eyes lighted with admiration when Thompson hurtled into the arena aboard a buckskin pinto, and for the next few minutes he forgot everything except the man who was riding that bolt of spotted lightning.

"Ride him, cowboy!"

The crowd roared the age-old cry of the working waddy who appreciates nothing quite so much as watching a good rider on a pitching, tricky horse. Top-hand Thompson wore a sneer on his face as the buckskin swapped ends in the middle of a back-breaking crow-hop. He was riding straight up, his right hand hanging loosely at his side. Then the pinto reared high on his hind legs.

The sneer left Thompson's face with surprising swiftness as he reached forward frantically to pound the bucker's ears. Down came that wicked head to be buried between knobby knees, after which the pinto made a shoulder-slip as he kicked high with his heels. As the cantle board moved forward to spank the rider, Top-hand made a desperate grab at the saddle-horn.

"Choke leather!" the crowd roared.

Even before the roar had quieted, the long-legged rider had joined the bird gang. That quick shift had fooled him. He had been clinging desperately as the horse was falling backward; the next minute he was sailing through space when the maddened outlaw buried his head.

Bucky Dorn was riding out to act as pick-up before Thompson hit the dust with his shoulders to make a looping roll. Broncho Peters flipped an expert loop over the head of the charging bucker, and the dazed rider sat up just as Bucky loped to his side.

"Look out, Bucky!"

A man shouted the warning from the sidelines as Top-hand lurched sideways, his right hand snaking inside his vest. Bucky Dorn was leaning slightly forward in the saddle to make his pick-up, and a bleak look filled his blue eyes as he neck-reined his horse with a slap of the reins.

The cutting pony swung over instantly, and the slender body of the deputy left the saddle with the same spring that would have bull-dogged a steer. His arms opened wide as he shot through the air, and he landed on Top-hand Thompson with a jolt that threw both men to the dirt, where they rolled over and over.

The half-drawn gun sailed through the dust as Bucky Dorn landed. Now he was on his feet waiting for the other to arise. His shoulder had knocked the wind from Thompson's lungs, but as the dust cleared, the tall rider lurched to his feet in a crouch. He lowered his head and came in with both arms swinging.

BUCKY DORN side-stepped that bull-like rush, after which his left fist shot out to straighten up the crouching Thompson. The deputy's feet twinkled as he stepped in to follow up, and he crossed his right to the jaw with a shock that numbed his arm to the shoulder.

Thompson seemed to hang poised for an instant as his eyes glazed, and then he crashed forward on his face. Bucky Dorn watched him for a few seconds, and the watching cowboys heard a click as he reached over and snapped a pair of cuffs on the unconscious man's wrists.

The top rails were now emptied as the cowboys crowded around the pair, and a roar went up as a man tore his way through the crowd. The men fell back as they recognized Old John Tobin, his manacled hands held out in front of him.

"Onfasten this blasted hardware," he snarled. "Yuh got th' extra key in yore pocket!"

THE young deputy flushed as he reached into the watch pocket of his Levis and produced a small key. A click, and he hung his red head while the old sheriff tenderly rubbed his wrists. Old John grinned as he patted his deputy on the shoulder.

"She's all right, Bucky," he growled. "Red Riggs tole us all about this jasper yere. He planned th' hold-up, an' he aimed tuh git you if yuh beat him ridin'. Did yuh do it?"

"Bucky Dorn wins th' saddle an' th' five hundred dollar purse!" The judge shouted the belated announcement to answer the sheriff's question.

"You also wins yourself five hundred from th' sheriff of Gila County," said Tobin. "Red Riggs confessed that him an' Thompson pulled that robbery over there!"

"I guess yo're right, Ole John," Bucky Dorn sighed. "I ain't such a much as a depitty!"

"I'll whip any ranny as says yuh ain't," the sheriff growled fiercely.

"What hit me?" Thompson asked.

Top-hand Thompson sat up as cheers filled the air; then he sank back wearily and closed his eyes.

When he opened them again, the old sheriff was bending over him.

"Come on," said Old John. "Let's git goin' tuh jail!"

"What hit me?" Thompson asked as he staggered to his feet.

"Him," said the sheriff, and he pointed to a figure that was just disappearing down the street on the back of a pitching horse. "My Buckaroo Depitty!"

RUSTLERS' ROOST

A "SIX-GUN SANDY" ADVENTURE IN PICTURES!

The old plainsman, Jed Peters, plunges into a burning cabin. With the flames roaring about him, Jed rescues Sandy Waters. The lad's father has been killed by outlaws. Jed becomes Sandy's self-appointed guardian. Some years later the youth is appointed sheriff. He wins fame as a gun-slinger.

One day, the young sheriff dismounts to investigate a call for help, out on the range. A hard-faced outlaw appears. "Strangers ain't welcome around hyar," the wanted man growls, reaching for his guns. "Specially if they're wearin' a star!" But Sandy streaks for his gun. The outlaw hits the dust.

Sandy peers over the edge of a cliff. He discovers that Jed Peters has fallen to a ledge far below. Sandy fastens a lass-rope to a tree at the top of the cliff and starts down. A pard of the vanquished outlaw suddenly appears. "Kill Wolf Stevens, will yuh," shouts the desperado. Gun in hand, he cuts the rope!

Sandy goes hurtling through space, but luckily grabs a projecting limb that breaks his fall. He clings to it desperately. The desperado's bullets smash into the rocks close to Sandy. Quick as lightning, he draws his own weapon. A well aimed shot sends the outlaw tumbling down to the rocks below!

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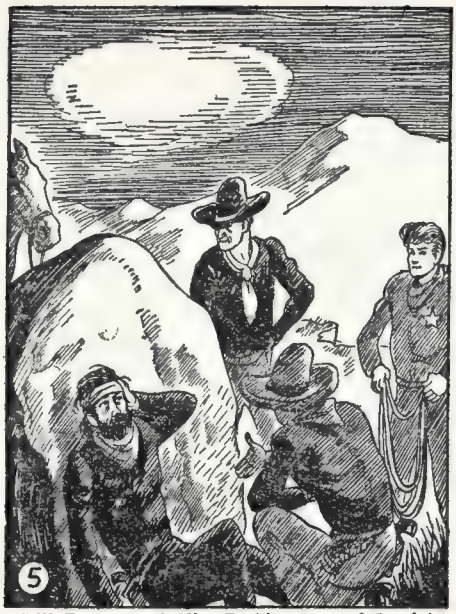
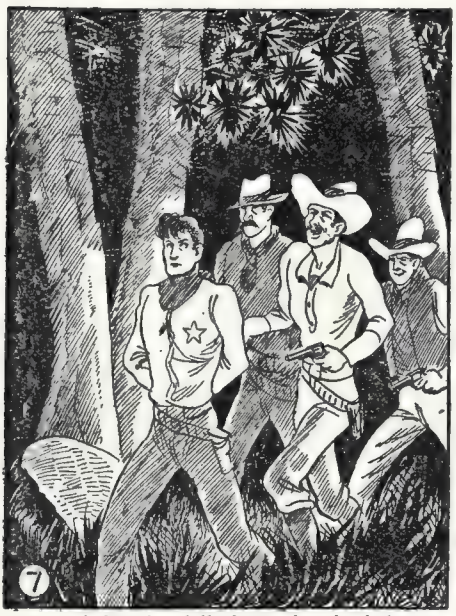


Bill Dawes and Slim Perkins, two of Sandy's deputies, appear. They have been searching for the young sheriff. Rustlers have stolen a herd of cattle. The deputies rescue Sandy and Jed, drag them to the top of the cliff and apply first aid. "The rustlers!" Sandy exclaims huskily as he spies approaching men!

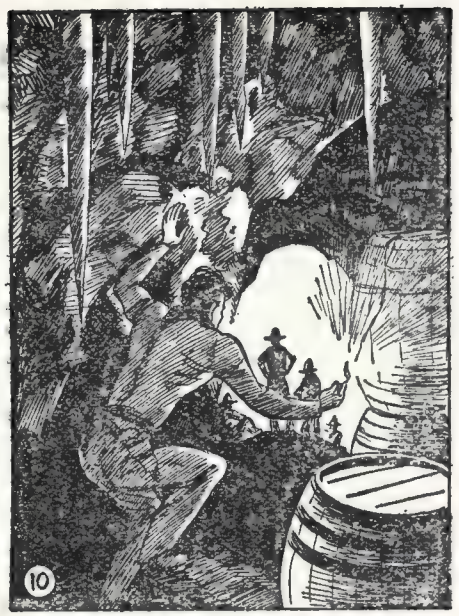
"Too many for us!" shouts Bill Dawes. "Come on—let's vamoose!" Riding double on the deputies' two horses, they dash away. But the outlaws are close! Guns roar and flame. Sandy and Slim crash to the ground as their horse falls. Slim and Bill Dawes are killed, and Jed dashes off alone.



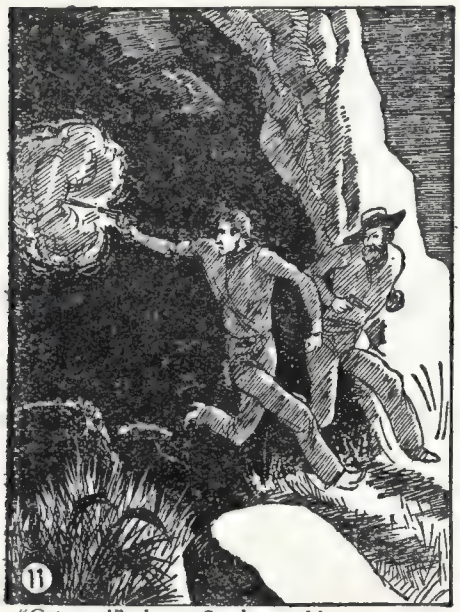
Stunned by the fall from the dead horse, Sandy is captured. "We'll teach yuh tuh kill two of our men!" snarls "Scar" Keen, the rustlers' leader, as he marches the young sheriff to the band's secret hangout. Sandy is grimly silent as he stalks ahead of Keen and his vicious looking men.

That night Jed shows up. Stealthily avoiding the sentry, he makes his way to the entrance of the outlaws' mountain hide-away. He has discovered a herd of stolen cattle guarded by some of the men. "Reckon these fellers don't know there's another way of gittin' intuh this cave," murmurs Jed to himself.

The old plainsman knows a secret, narrow passage. With a small torch in his hand, he stealthily enters. He finds Sandy lying on a ledge—securely bound. "I'm sure glad yuh ain't hurt, boy," says Jed as he releases the young sheriff and gives him a gun.



"We'd better make a run for it,' whispers Jed. "No, wait," says Sandy. "I've got an idea." He steals back to where the rustlers have cached several barrels of powder, and lights a fuse. "Come and get us!" he shouts —and Sandy and Jed dash for freedom.



"Got one!" shouts Sandy, as his gun roars. The weapons of the outlaws boom loudly inside the mouth of the cave! Bullets whistle about Sandy and Jed. Their own guns bark defiance. The outlaws do not notice the swiftly burning powder fuse.

There is a deafening explosion! The powder barrel has blown up, bringing death and destruction to a number of the rustlers—but Scar Keen and three of his ornery polecats escape! "We pretty near got 'em all," says Jed, "but thar's more t' be done!"

NEXT MONTH: SIX-GUN SANDY in THE SECRET MINE

The Ghost Rider *of* Red Rock

Bob Buchanan Signs Up for Trouble at the Flat A Bar—And Gallops Square into a Hell-Bent Struggle Against a Human Coyote!

A Swift-Moving Complete Novelette

By HAPSBURG LIEBE

Author of "Long Trail's End," "The Gypper," etc.

CHAPTER I

On the Job

BOB BUCHANAN had a keen eye. Otherwise, he wouldn't have seen that the fellow who peered at him from behind a boulder a hundred yards down the road wore a mask. Bob turned his sorrel cow horse into the scrub, dismounted and dropped rein. A few minutes later, he stole up near the would-be robber, leveled his old Colt and barked a single word:

"Reach!"

The other dropped his gun and reached. Buchanan snatched up the weapon. He tore away the bandana mask, and smothered an exclamation of surprise. The would-be robber was a handsome youth of eighteen! Bob muttered:

"Shame to take *you* to the sheriff, but anybody that'd try to hold up a lone cowpoke— Say, kid, where's yore hawss?"

It was hidden in a chaparral thicket near-by.

Soon afterwards the two were riding off together. Buchanan's attempts to learn something of his captive's identity went for naught. However, as a sun-baked town loomed in the distance. the youngster volunteered this, awkwardly:

"I was expectin' somebody else, back there."

"Yeah? Who was you expectin'?"

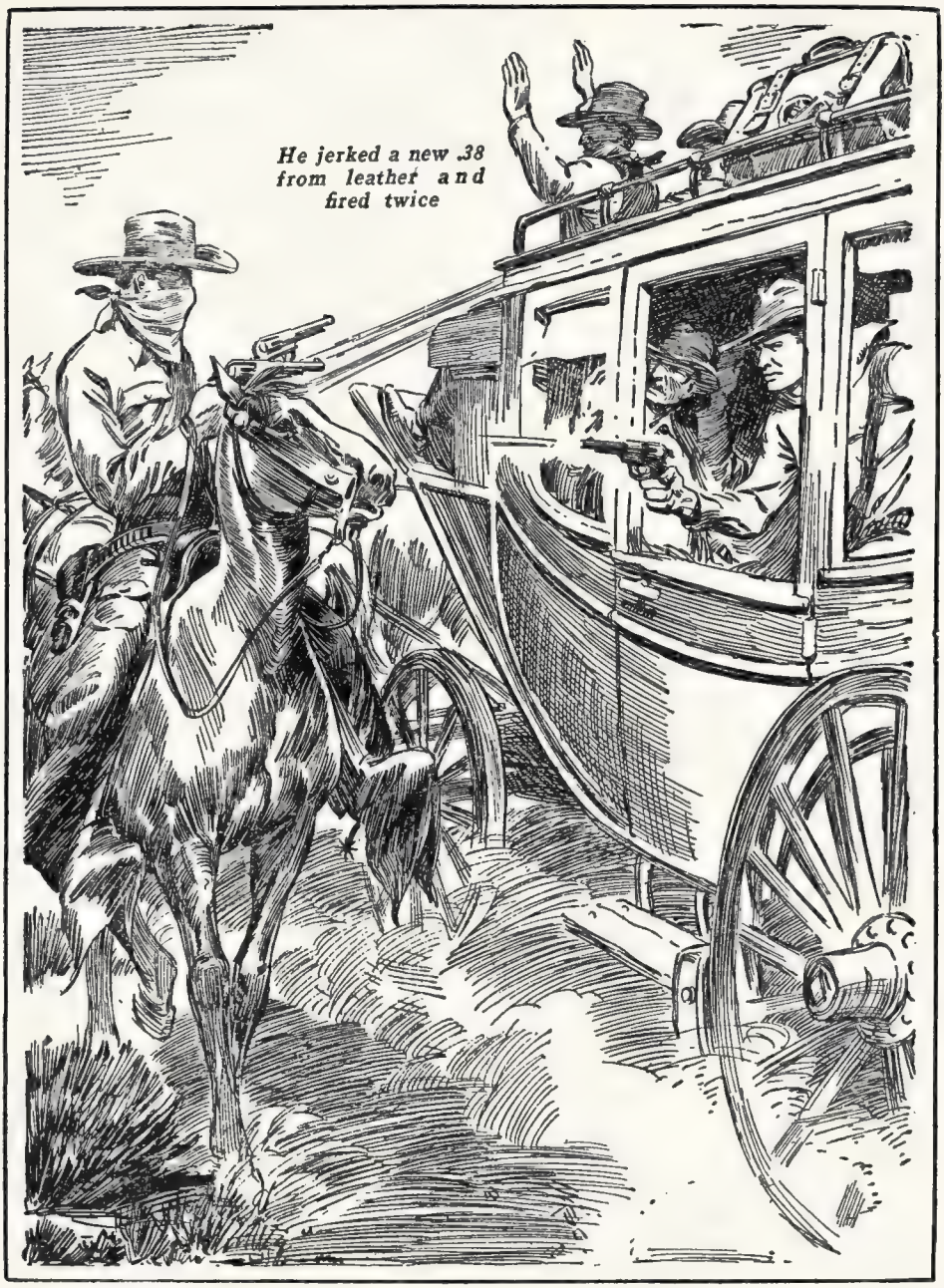
"Black Rufe Lockerd," the youngster blurted.

"Who's he?" asked Buchanan—and had no answer.

Dusk was gathering fast when the pair rode into the main street of Red Rock City. A slim girl in overalls and raggy Stetson hat sprang from an old buckboard and ran to them. She addressed the youth:

"Johnny!" There was relief in her voice. "Where've you been?"

Their close resemblance marked them as brother and sister. Buchanan, man's man strictly, forgot about the sheriff and the gun inside his shirt, and rode on. The girl caught the rein of the kid's horse, stood on tiptoe and whispered excitedly. Then the two left town in haste.



He jerked a new .38 from leather and fired twice

The cowboy stranger had drawn up in front of the town's one big general merchandise store. As he dismounted and tossed his horse's rein over a hitch-rack peg, he wished that he had given, "Johnny" his gun back. A heavily-built, shaggy-headed dark man appeared in the dusk beside him, and spoke gruffly:

"You lookin' for somebody, mebbe?"

"Why, yeah," drawled Buchanan. "Joel C. Greer, owner o' the Big JG ranch, it is. I'm from the Circle Y

outfit, next county east. Greer was over there buyin' all the Circle Y cattle, and he offered me a job."

"I'm a Greer man, myself," growled the heavily-built, dark man. "Rufe Lockerd, that's me. Joel's in the store there. He owns the store. Also, he owns them three saloons y'see across the street, as well as the biggest cow spread in Red Rock Valley."

The newcomer had tensed. Rufe Lockerd—this was the *hombre* that the kid had intended sticking up! It would have been a sizable job, since Lockerd carried two guns in tied-down holsters, man-killer fashion.

Just then Joel Greer came out of the store. Tall and gaunt, he was, with a round-trimmed beard and a broad, hard, smoothly-shaven upper lip. He peered toward the cowboy.

"Hello, Buchanan. Glad yo're here. I shore need you," he said.

"He rode in with Johnny Allister jest now," said Black Rufe Lockerd.

"That so?" Greer almost snarled it. "Travelin' with my enemies, eh?"

Buchanan, of course, didn't understand. Before he could speak, there was the shattering blast of a six-gun inside the store. Five shots were fired. The lamps were wrecked, and broken glass tinkled in the blackness.

RUFE LOCKERD drew both guns and rushed to the front door. The barrel of a Colt collided with his head, and sent him sprawling, dazed. A tall and lanky, gray-masked, gray-clothed figure sprang past him and into the street.

"Shoot, Buchanan!" cried Joel Greer. "Kill him! It's that darned Ghost Rider—shoot, quick!"

Already the so-called "Ghost Rider" had turned a corner of the store building and was out of sight. Greer wailed:

"Why in thunder didn't you drill him, Buchanan?"

"I sorta like to know who I'm drillin', and why," Bob drawled.

The big man of Red Rock turned and ran into his darkened store. The cowboy stranger followed him, and a curious crowd that had gathered followed the stranger. Greer found an emergency lamp and lighted it, and with it in his hands hurried toward the rear.

"Sheriff Tom Rice ain't never around when he's needed," fumed old Joel. "Marsh! Hey, Marsh! What about the money?"

YOUNG Marsh Greer, lone son of Joel C., was in the rear corner that served as an office. There was a slight bullet burn across his right forearm. He placed a still warm six-gun on the desk. His voice shook as he answered:

"The Ghost got every cent o' the two thousand you sent Rufe Lockerd to the Hartsville bank after today, Dad. You havin' Rufe to ride back on the Skeleton Creek trail instead o' the country road didn't do any good, did it?"

Buchanan's mind flashed back to Johnny Allister. The kid had meant to hold Lockerd up for that two thousand dollars!

Marsh Greer was still talking: "I sneaked a gun out o' a desk drawer, and kept the lowdown robber from leavin' the back way, like he got in, but—"

"But he simply shot the lights out and high-tailed it the front way," old Greer interrupted harshly. He faced Buchanan. "A few nights ago, I lost a hundred head o' beef cattle to that same thief, and now he's took my cowboy payroll from under my nose. You could 'a' shot him, and wouldn't do it. I won't need you, Circle Y cowpoke. You don't suit me a-tall."

"Right!" quickly agreed Buchanan. "You want a gun-slinger, not cowhand. I see through it now. You happened to spy me bustin' walnuts

in the air with bullets, over on the Circle Y, practicin'. I wouldn't have a lowdown killer job. And now so long to you, and you can go plum' square to hell."

Joel Greer was speechless with rage. Not since he could remember had any man dared talk to him like that. Buchanan turned and went to the street. He half expected that he would run into Black Rufe Lockerd and trouble, but he didn't. Black Rufe was at the livery stable watering-trough, bathing the lump that the barrel of the mysterious rider's Colt had left on his head.

PROCEEDING to the darkness of a vacant lot, Bob ground-anchored his horse and looked up the office of the sheriff. Tom Rice had gone to Greer's to investigate the robbery. When he came back, he found the strange cowboy leaning in at a side window.

"I'm Bob Buchanan, Sheriff," began the newcomer to Red Rock City. "Mind tellin' me what sorta youngster Johnny Allister is?"

Rice, a tall and lanky, elderly man, eyed Buchanan hard. He was mad —Joel Greer was running things with an iron hand. Rice couldn't find a deputy who wasn't under the big man's thumb. Greer, in spite of him, was making a joke of the law. Therefore, the officer was amazingly frank.

"Johnny Allister is salt o' the earth, him and his sister, too. Their daddy, Kirby Allister, was the best friend I ever had. They own the Flat A Bar ranch, a little ways up this valley, and Joel Greer has nearly squeezed 'em to death tryin' to make 'em sell out to him. Fact is, their cattle has dwindled so much that they're only keepin' two cowboys now. Now s'pose you open up about yoreself, eh?"

Bob decided that this sheriff could be trusted, and he told all he had to tell. Then he put the question, bluntly: "Who's the Ghost Rider *hombre*, Sheriff?"

"Nobody—er, seems to know," said Rice. "I understand his face has never been seen unmasked. All his sly work indicates that he's an enemy only to Joel Greer, if it'll do you any good to know that."

Buchanan laughed. "I'm shore wishin' him luck!"

"More people than just you is wishin' him luck." Tom Rice grinned a slow grin. "I think you'll do to ride the river with, Buchanan, and I'd be glad if you'd go to the Flat A Bar and tell them kids I said to fire Pid Franish and put you in his place, since yo're out of a job.

"I got a hunch that Franish is a Greer man, though I think their other waddy, Ducey Sneed, is okay. Mebbe you'll need to do a little scrappin' shortly, but I reckon you won't mind that."

"I'm ridin' over there right now," Bob said.

"Fine. See that Johnny don't try stickin' up that Lockerd killer any more, will you? He cain't get even with Joel Greer that way, shore."

Buchanan agreed to do his best. In almost no time he was in the saddle and riding up the valley road.

A LIGHTED window served as a beacon for him; therefore, he had no difficulty in finding the old and rambling house on the Flat A Bar. At the gate he dismounted and halloed, and a shadowy masculine figure appeared on the veranda with a rifle. It was Johnny Allister. He took no chances with unknown callers.

"I brought you yore gun, kid," said Buchanan, voice friendly. "Also I got some word for you straight from Tom Rice."

The sheriff's name was as magic. Not long afterward, Buchanan was sitting in the lighted living room talking with Johnny and his sister, whose name was Mary Let—Mary

Letitia, that is. Young Allister then told his new rider something that Tom Rice had kept to himself:

"Mebbe you heard o' the big gold strike at Badger Tail, Bob. My Daddy went, and so did Joel Greer, and Rufe Lockerd. Joel wasn't worth much at that time. Mary Let and me didn't hear from Dad for a good while—too busy to write, I guess—and so I rode to Badger Tail to see about him. Well, on the very day I got there it happened."

JOHNNY ALLISTER swallowed hard. His face was pale in the lamplight.

"On the day I got to Badger Tail, the dynamite shack they all used had blowed up and killed or crippled two-thirds o' the men there. Dad was one o' them that was killed. You never saw such a time, Bob. Wives and kinfolks and cripples sold options on their claims for almost nothin' so as to get away from the place, and it was Joel Greer who bought the options.

"I was so tore up that I sold him Dad's claim for a measly hundred dollars—wasn't of age, but I wouldn't crawfish on the deal. After some months, Joel comes back here with more money than I'd thought was in the world. Bought all o' the valley land but this ranch, and bought a lot o' property in town.

"Well," Johnny continued, "old Greer wanted the Flat A Bar on account o' the water, but he wouldn't pay half enough, and Mary Let didn't want to sell anyhow. This is home to us, Bob. Joel has done all he could to run us off, most o' which was in havin' our cattle stole.

"I've caught Greer men rustlin' cattle two or three times, but never had a witness, and you shore cain't fight that old sidewinder in court without witnesses. We tried it, and failed."

"You reckon it's possible Greer was the cause o' that dynamite shack blowin' up?" Buchanan pondered. "He profited enough by it."

"More than possible," declared Mary Let Allister. "He's not too good for even such a cowardly, murderous thing as that!"

"We're trustin' you all the way, Bob," said Johnny, suddenly. "Last night about ninety head o' fine steers, all wearin' our brand fresh burnt on, was left here, and we don't know how come. I left so early I didn't know until Mary Let found me in town—I was with you—and told me. Them steers had never been branded before. They'd all been slick-ears."

"Think the Ghost Rider done that?" inquired Buchanan.

"I ain't a bit shore." Allister turned to his sister. "Mary Let, we're a nice pair. Bob ain't had supper, I'd bet, and we've not even mentioned it!"

The girl rose. "Excuse us, Bob."

She hastened into the dining room and lighted a lamp that stood in the centre of the table. Lying beside the lamp, weighted by a saltshaker, there was a scrap of paper almost covered with words printed in pencil. She caught up the scrap with a cry that brought her brother and Buchanan to her immediately.

JOHNNY took it and held it close to the lamp. All three of them read the message at the same time.

Don't feel bad about keepin' the new cattle. They are yores as much as any cattle was ever yores and look out for more. For god's sake, Johnny, don't buck Joel Greers' gunfighters.

G. R.

"That G. R. means Ghost Rider!" exclaimed young Allister.

"Who on earth *is* he?" cried Mary Let.

"A heap is plain to me," Buchanan said. "The Rider's a enemy only to Greer, and it's only to help you two. He took the Big JG cattle that disappeared recent, drove 'em across

the Border and sold 'em and bought slickears with the money, then branded the slickears and drove 'em here. More is to come, he says.

"Yeah, two thousand dollars' worth; Greer's cowboy payroll, y'know. Well, you'll keep 'em, Johnny. And you shore ain't lockin' horns with any Greer killers. Get me, son, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah, I get you, but—"

Their ears had caught the slight creaking of a front veranda step. The sound was repeated. Bob leaned over the lamp and blew, and darkness swooped down.

"Stick here," he whispered. "Ma'am, don't be afraid."

Both the dining room windows were open. The new Flat A Bar cowhand slipped through one of them and to the ground outside, and went swiftly but silently around to the front. The intruder had halted midway of the steps. He held a ready six-gun; its barrel gleamed faintly in diffused light from a living room window.

Leveling his own Colt, Buchanan was just ready to order the fellow to drop his gun and elevate his hands, when there was a flash and a roar a few rods off in the thicker darkness. Then there was a pounding of hoofs that rapidly became dim.

The unknown enemy had wilted to the steps, his gun clattering. Bob crept to him. Johnny Allister came.

"The Rider fired that shot," said Buchanan. "On the job, wasn't he?"

AN hour passed. In Red Rock City, Joel Greer and his son were ready to close the store for the night. Old Joel had just visited his saloons and talked with many under-cover henchmen, among them being all of Sheriff Tom Rice's deputies. The result brought a smile to his granite-hard face. After having lighted a cigar by thrusting it down the chimney of a lamp that burned on his desk, he picked up a bar that fitted over the back door.

But before he could drop the bar into place, a boot-heel struck the door from the alley side and opened it with a bang. A heavy human form tumbled off a horse and lay limp in the doorway. Buchanan spoke from the darkness.

"There's somethin' that belongs to you, Joel. He ain't dead, but he's creased right bad. Better advise him to be careful in the business o' runnin' strange cowpokes out o' the county. Now, you old rattlesnake, go plum' to hell."

He rode away silently. Joel Greer and his son Marsh bent over the inert figure on the threshold.

"Black Rufe Lockerd!" gasped young Greer.

CHAPTER II

One of the Enemy?

THE next day's sun had just cleared the rocky hills that formed the eastern rim of Red Rock Valley when Pid Franish, out on the Flat A Bar range, caught the signal. A man riding a dun-colored horse had put a hand up and touched his hat a few times, as though to straighten it on his head, that was all. The fellow soon disappeared in a thicket of tall scrub.

But before Franish could turn his mount toward the rendezvous, Ducey Sneed, the older Allister range hand, rode out of a near-by gully. This Sneed was very tall, very thin, dangerously quiet.

"Was you fixin' to go somewhere, mebbe, Pid?" he drawled.

"No place special." Franish clipped his words. "Say, you ain't spyin' on me, Ducey, are you?"

The two hadn't been getting along very well together lately. Sneed said: "Well, s'pose I was spyin' on

you? Was you aimin' to do somethin' about it, cowboy?"

Franish shrugged and rode off, not directly toward the hidden man who had come out from town to see him, but to the north. It would be a simple matter to turn westward later, when he was out of Sneed's range of vision.

At last Pid reined in beside the thicket that concealed Joel Greer's messenger, and called guardedly:

"Well, what is it?"

A voice came promptly: "News for you, Franish. The boss is offerin' five thousand dollars cash for the plum' dead body o' that Ghost jigger. Joel and Black Rufe figgers he was at the Allister house last night, and thinks he'll come back there, so you keep on yore toes. Got any news for the boss?"

"No," growled Franish. "I cain't cut out bunches o' these cattle and run 'em off, with Duce Sneed watchin' me like a hawk all the time."

"Greer thought o' that," came from the man in the thicket. "He suggested that Sneed might mebbe be found dead somewheres. Buchanan the same. Both jobs must be done quickly, says Joel. Don't forgit it!"

Franish rode off, scowling. Killing Bob Buchanan and Ducey Sneed would establish him as a big-money man, like Black Rufe Lockerd, but he had a hunch that it would prove difficult.

WITHIN the hour Bob Buchanan found him.

"You ain't workin' for the Allisters any more, Pid," coldly announced Bob. "You got a week's pay comin'. I brought it."

Franish went ashen. His eyes glittered. His voice was pinched: "Why didn't Johnny do this firin'?"

"Johnny's only a kid, and he's got orders not to buck any o' Joel Greer's polecat gun-slingers," readily answered Buchanan.

He'd just had a talk with Ducey Sneed, and it had been enlightening. Now, with his left hand he extended a crumpled banknote. His right hand was ready to snatch black-walnut and steel from holster leather if there was any necessity for it.

There was!

Pid Franish reached for the money with one hand, and drew with the other. But Buchanan's Colt was the first to blaze and roar. Franish's shot went wild, and as he collapsed, his horse bolted.

BOB quieted his sorrel and sat staring down at the dead man. Never before had he been forced to do a thing like this. Always he'd had a horror of this sort of thing. But now, oddly or not, he felt no regret whatsoever. He'd had to preserve his own life, of course.

He dismounted, picked up all that was left of Franish and put it across his saddle, and got up behind. Then he rode for Red Rock City, giving the Flat A Bar headquarters wide berth. No need to upset the two Allisters.

It was still too early in the day for a great deal of activity on the sun-baked and dusty streets. The few who noted the appearance of the sorrel cow horse and its double burden raised no hue or cry. Bob had intended going straight to the office of Sheriff Tom Rice, but he changed his mind when he saw Joel Greer standing on the sidewalk in front of the biggest saloon.

Riding over to the edge of the warped boards, he deposited that which had been Pid Franish, at Greer's feet.

"There's somethin' else that belongs to you, Joel," he said. "This one wasn't so lucky."

The big man's bearded face jerked. He hurried into the saloon, and began to bleat the name of the man who had just ridden in from a ren-

dezvous with Franish on the Allister range. Buchanan proceeded to the sheriff's office, slipped from his saddle and dropped rein, and stepped inside.

"You told me I'd likely have to do some scrappin' out there," said Bob, drawing up near Rice at his spur-scarred desk. "Well, listen to this."

HE gave a brief account of it. Barely had he finished when Joel Greer and half a dozen of his henchmen, among them Rufe Lockerd with his head bandaged, rushed in. Old Joel pointed to Buchanan and rasped:

"Tom, that *hombre* murdered Pid Franish. I got a witness who'll swear it, and at the proper time I'll produce him. You lock Buchanan up!"

Rice was on his feet now, and quite unruffled. "Why, Joel, no use to be so het up. You, Bob, you got any witnesses?"

"Nobody saw it," angrily clipped Buchanan. "Listen, Greer. Franish was yore man, wasn't he? Had him on the Flat A Bar lookin' after yore thievin' interests, didn't you? Shore you did, and he'd 'a' had all the Allister cattle run off if it hadn't been for Ducey Sneed. Don't you deny it, you sneakin' old rattlesnake!"

Red Rock City's big boss stiffened, his jaw-muscles working in rage, and glared at Black Rufe Lockerd. He was disappointed because Lockerd made no move toward wiping Buchanan off the face of the earth.

A tall, thin cowboy appeared in the jail corridor doorway, and in his hand he held a leveled and ready Colt. It was Ducey Sneed, and how he'd ever managed to get there unnoticed nobody ever knew—except Ducey Sneed himself.

His voice was so hard that it almost clanked:

"Don't none o' you polecats drag iron. Anyhow, Bob's beat you to it. Trouble is, he couldn't fight all o' you and win out. Tom Rice, you know me, and you know I ain't any liar. I'm tellin' you now that Bob Buchanan shot Pid Franish in self-defense. Pid went for his gun first. I seen it. There's no use o' holdin' Bob for trial, Tom."

"If it was a fair trial, it'd be different," said Buchanan. "But it wouldn't be. Greer would dig up some more 'witnesses,' and I'd be hung."

"And he'd have the jury fixed," boldly added the sheriff. "Joel, I'm not holdin' Bob. He's free, and if he has to fight his way out o' town, I'll help him; and so, I reckon, will Duce Sneed. Now take yore friends and get out o' here, Joel."

At this open defiance Greer showed diabolical rage. His henchmen eyed the yawning muzzles of Rice's, Sneed's and Buchanan's Colts, and all but carried him out to the street. The sheriff and his companions watched until Greer and his men had gone down the street and disappeared inside a saloon.

"Now mebbe they won't hatch up somethin'!" said Bob. "Ducey, did you shore-enough see my gun fight with Franish?"

"I absolutely did," Sneed answered. "Would 'a' went to you, but I was tryin' to catch a strange *hombre* I'd seen on the range. Greer man, o' course. Run him clean to town, which is how come I'm here. My hawss throwed a shoe; will plum hafta get another one put on before I start back."

"Reckon I better high-tail it back right now," Buchanan said.

JOEL GREER and his cutthroats had paused at the bar for a round of drinks, and then had gone into a small rear room for the purpose of holding a council of war. Just as they seated themselves at card tables, a stone, the size of a man's fist, crashed through an alley window,

struck an inner wall, and rebounded almost into old Joel's lap.

Black Rufe Lockerd snatched it up. Tied to the stone there was a scrap of paper, and on it, printed in pencil, was a message.

Purple-faced, the big boss read the message.

The men you had ridin' herd on that eighteen hundred head o' Herefords in a grassy park away up on yore north range is all bound hand and foot in a line cabin. Better hustle somebody up there to cut 'em loose before they starve to death.

G. R.

"That danged Ghost!" growled Black Rufe. "Look, Joel. There's a line at the bottom you didn't read." He pointed to this:

P. S.: I took the cattle.

THOSE on the Allister ranch were expecting fresh difficulty at any moment, and guessed that it would be in the form of disappearing stock—in reprisal, as it were. Joel Greer had been bested at every turn since the coming of the erstwhile Circle Y cowboy, and he was not the person to take a beating gracefully. At Buchanan's suggestion, the slender Flat A Bar herds were bunched along the creek head, where water was plentiful and grass lush. Two men riding guard over them would be enough, ordinarily, to keep rustlers away.

It was long past the middle of the afternoon when this bunching was finished. Buchanan hadn't touched food since breakfast. Sneed had, and he now insisted upon Bob's going in for something to eat.

The hungry cowboy rode in. As he drew near the house, he noted that a strange horse, a fine bay, stood over a trailing rein near the gate. Buchanan was soon dismounting beside the animal and dropping rein. On the veranda he came upon Johnny Allister and his sister talking with young Marsh Greer!

At once the Allisters turned to the newcomer, who saw that their countenances were sober and thoughtful. Johnny said:

"Anything can happen, Bob." To the visitor: "Marsh, s'pose you tell Bob exactly what you told Mary Let and me."

The more or less dapper young Greer tried to smile.

"Well," he began, facing Buchanan, "I—I went to school with Miss Allister and Johnny, and always liked 'em both. They'll tell you that, I'm shore. You won't want to believe it, mebbe, but my Dad has forced me into bein' a bigger slave than anybody else.

"He was so mad over somethin', I don't know what, that he cussed me out and made me leave, swearin' I should never inherit a cent o' his money. And so I decided to throw in with Johnny and his sister, if they'd let me."

"And fight yore daddy, eh?" said Bob, narrow-eyed.

"I reckon it amounts to that." Marsh went on: "Ord'nary cowboy pay, any time it's handy to pay me, will be all right."

Buchanan glanced toward Allister. "Goin' to take him on, Johnny?"

"I believe I will," said Johnny. "We can use him. It ain't fair to blame him for what his daddy done. He did like Mary Let and me, back when we went to school together, before old Joel got to be plum locoed over money and took to treatin' him so mean."

BOB frowned. "And before old Joel blowed up Kirby Allister and the rest o' them Badger Tail miners and then bought their claims for a few short songs. Well, kid, it's yore outfit, and not mine. You, Marsh, who does yore daddy and his crowd think the Ghost fella is?"

Marsh Greer was smiling broadly now. Johnny Allister had sided with him openly; it gave him confidence. He said: "Some day, cowpoke, I'll be at liberty to tell you somethin' that'll surprise you."

"Well," drawled the cowpoke, "don't be in a hurry about it, for I ain't so anxious to know. Er—Miss Mary Let, ma'am, if I could have a bite to eat—honest, I'm hungry enough to eat a whole raw hippopotaymus."

HE ate in haste, then rode back to the creek-head section and to Ducey Sneed with tidings of the latest developments. He'd made a mistake, he admitted to Ducey, in not seeming to fall in with the hiring of Marsh Greer, since this would have made young Greer less wary. But it had always been hard for Bob to pretend.

"There's a chance that Marsh was tellin' the truth," muttered Sneed.

"Yeah?" said Buchanan. "All the same, we're watchin' him."

Sneed grinned. "I didn't get done talkin' minute ago. I meant there was one chance in sixty-five trillion that Marsh was tellin' the truth!" Then Sneed went cold sober.

"Listen, Bob. There's nothin' I wouldn't do for them kids, because they're Kirby Allister's—wish you'd knowed Kirb; solid gold, he was. But now I'm leavin', an here's why: every time I see a Greer I want to kill him, and if I stay on here I'll kill Marsh. Johnny didn't know how p'izen bad I hate 'em, or he'd never took Marsh on.

"Howsoever, I'll not ask him to crawfish. You tell him, Bob. *Adios!*"

He rode off swiftly, with Buchanan staring wide-eyed after him.

"Dang them two youngsters," said Bob to himself. "And yet, you just got to like 'em."

Allister and Greer came riding out a little later. Buchanan called Johnny aside and gave him Sneed's message.

"Ducey is a peach of a fella," Johnny grinned, but a regular pepperpod. He won't leave, though. I'll bet you a hawss I could holler his name at midnight o' tonight, don't matter where I am, and get a answer!"

Although there was peace on the Flat A Bar for forty-eight hours, nobody there became careless. Allister had brought an old hard-rock miner's wife to the ranch house for a companion to his sister, and was living on the range with Buchanan and Greer. Bob had talked Johnny into keeping an eye on Marsh. But so far neither cowboy nor youthful cattleman had seen anything that even remotely suggested Marsh's being still one of the enemy.

CHAPTER III

Guaranteed Results

AFTER the late moon had come up, the next night, Buchanan piled down on his blanket under a scraggly piñon to snatch an hour or so of sleep. He woke with the feeling that he was no longer alone, and turned his head cautiously to behold a spectacle that was sheer drama in itself.

Silhouetted between him and the moon, scarcely four rods away, there was a man on a horse; both were as motionless as though cast in bronze or hewn from stone. The fellow wore gray, and under the front rim of his broad hat no profile was to be seen because of his being perfectly masked.

It was the Ghost Rider!

He had certainly proved himself a friend to the Flat A Bar. This fact notwithstanding, Buchanan was conscious of a tiny chill at his spine. Then the fellow rode straight for the cowboy on the blanket. He reined

at a point very close to Bob, and peered down at him. Buchanan noted that the eyes of the unknown were gleaming back of the holes in the gray mask.

"Howdy, pardner," drawled the cowboy. He sat up. "I'm guessin' that yo're scoutin' for news. If I'm correct, you can nod, if you want to."

Instantly the Rider nodded. Buchanan said:

"Well, Johnny acted sentimental and hired Marsh Greer for a cowhand, but I reckon things ain't any worse than usual with that exception. Ducey Sneed is gone. We heard that Joel Greer had lost a big bunch o' Herefords, and have been expectin' a sorta correspondin' bunch o' fresh-branded slickears from across the Border; also, we've expected some two thousand dollars' wort o' cattle besides them. I believe this is all the news, pardner."

THE so-called Ghost immediately faced southward and assumed an attitude of listening. Bob went to his feet, also faced the south and bent an ear. There was a faint rumbling sound that meant many cloven hoofs on a drive. Seventeen hundred head of cattle were coming!

"Yeah," the cowboy breathed, "I get you, pardner. You shore are one good *amigo* to them kids. Even me, I'm thankful to you for it, myself."

The unknown leaned impulsively toward Buchanan and put out his right hand. Bob gripped it tight and released it as an iron-shod hoof struck a stone somewhere on the moonlit terrain behind him. The Rider fed the steel of a spur rowel to his mount.

Just as he was swallowed in a scrub copse, Marsh Greer galloped up to Buchanan. Marsh had taken from an armpit holster a double-action Colt .38. His ovice rang like cold metal.

"Who was that *hombre*, cowpoke?"

Buchanan ignored the question, sprang to his horse and swung into the saddle. Johnny Allister rode up. Allister had heard the low rumble of cloven hoofs, and understood very well. Greer was listening now. His face seemed taut in the moonlight. The three sat their horses silently there at the scrubby piñon until the rumble had assumed the proportions of a roar.

THEN two point riders, weary Mexican *vaqueros* on weary ponies appeared suddenly before the trio. Marsh Greer began to fire questions one after another, in English and in Spanish, and to them all had a single answer.

"No comprende," said the Mexicans.

"The hell you don't understand!" snarled Greer.

Buchanan had twice got Johnny Allister's eye and winked, and Johnny's boyish countenance had hardened. Greer spurred his fine bay viciously. The horse was off like a bullet—with Buchanan following on his sorrel. Marsh passed a *vaquero* on the flank with no more than a glance at the man, and rode on toward the rear of the moving herd.

A little way beyond the drag rider, the Ghost sat his saddle with the easy grace of a centaur.

Greer's eyes found him readily. Greer rode a half-circle, and approached the Ghost from behind. Buchanan was still following Marsh. Bob's horse stepped into a pack-rat's den, and before it could regain its footing, Marsh had leveled his .38 and fired.

The unknown's horse jumped so quickly that the rider was unseated and pitched to the ground. Greer was taking deliberate aim at the prostrate gray-clad figure, when Buchanan's six-gun bellowed.

"Two can play this game o' ambush, little rattlesnake!" cried Bob, as Marsh went tumbling earthward.

The cowboy slipped to the ground, caught up the .38 and threw it far. Then he ran on to the mysterious Rider, who was now climbing to his feet. The fall had merely stunned him for a few seconds; Greer's bullet had scored his horse's back, had not touched him. He lifted a hand to Buchanan in a salute that was almost military, wheeled and ran to catch his mount.

"'Sta bueno! Vaya!" yelled Bob to the drag rider, who had turned back with a drawn gun.

Marsh Greer wasn't dead. His eyes glittered in the moonlight like those of a cornered weasel.

"So," growled Bob, "you was out here to get the Ghost *hombre!* But you didn't get him, did you? How hard yore daddy must 'a' had to ride you to make you tackle a man's job like that!"

A LITTLE more than an hour afterward, old Joel Greer and Black Rufe Lockerd were emptying glasses at one of Greer's Red Rock City bars, when a nighthawk townsman called from the front entrance:

"By gravy, Joel, here's Marsh, all shot up! Come out here!"

The big boss and Lockerd rushed to the semi-dark street. Marsh Greer was bound securely to his saddle by ornate bridle and martingale leather.

A rawhide thong held his hands behind him. His voice was decidedly shaken:

"I—I knocked that damned Ghost off his hawss, and then Bob Buchanan downed me. His bullet hit me on one side o' the neck and nearly busted my j-j-jaw. And Buchanan s-s-said to tell you this:

"'Here's another one that was lucky, because my hawss was jigglin' me when I shot—and go plum' square to hell, you old rattlesnake!"

For once unable to find an oath that was strong enough to relieve his feelings, Greer, the elder, was silent. But after the doctor had taken charge of his son, old Joel had this to say to Lockerd: "Yore own hurt is about well now, and we'll hafta try that other plan we talked over. I'm guaranteein', Rufe, we'll get results from that."

They did get results from that, and how!

THE Red Rock City sheriff left town at dawn on the next morning, and rode hard up Red Rock Valley. At sunrise he pulled his horse to a halt at the Allister ranch house, and halloed. Mary Let appeared on the veranda. She smiled brightly at this grizzled man who had been her father's best friend.

"Why, hello, Sheriff! Come in and have some breakfast, won't you?"

"Thanks, Mary Let." said the officer, lifting his John B. hat, "but I reckon I've not got time. Buchanan here?"

"No, but he'll be in right off, for a hot breakfast. Johnny was in, and he was to send Bob when he got back," the girl said.

Tom Rice frowned, glanced off northward on the range, saw Buchanan coming and rode to meet him. As their horses were drawn up within two yards of each other, the officer began to talk rapidly.

"You'll hafta high-tail it, Bob. Them crooked Greer deputies o' mine was up to somethin' last night, and was makin' ready to ride early today. I guessed what it was. Mebbe you can guess it the same as I did, eh?"

Buchanan nodded. "Yeah, I think I can. The deputies is comin' to arrest me for shootin' Marsh Greer, and they aim to play the old trick—murder me on the way to jail, and swear it was self-defense. Right?"

"That was my figgerin' anyhow," Rice said. "Joel Greer has realized that his hash is cooked unless he gets rid o' both you and the Ghost

hombre, and he'll bust the earth wide open to do it."

"I reckon he will," Bob agreed. "I got some news—"

"It'll keep," the sheriff cut in. "Right now I must ride a streak down the west side o' the valley. Want to make it to town before I'm missed. See why, don't you?"

He waved a hand and spurred his horse into a gallop. Buchanan looked off toward Red Rock City. There was no tiny cloud of dust to indicate that the deputies were coming, and he rode on to the house. After a hurried breakfast, he stowed inside his shirt the hard rations that Johnny's sister had given him, and was soon on his way back to the creek-head section to tell Johnny of Rice's visit and warning.

WITH the cattle that had arrived during the night, the old Flat A Bar looked like a real cow outfit once more. Young Allister sat his horse and eyed the grazing herds smilingly. If only he had three more waddies of the caliber of Bob, or Ducey—and in that same minute he turned his head to see Buchanan coming with three other riders, and one of the three was the pepperpod, Sneed!

"I'm certainly tickled to see you, cowboy," Johnny called to Ducey, as the four drew near. He noted that the pair of strangers had the general appearance of range hands, and that each of them carried two frontier model Colt .45s, instead of one.

"Decided you needed help, kid, and I brought some," drawled Sneed. "This here's Sam Kelso and Bill Minter, old *amigos* o' mine. Bob overtook us a ways back, and he's shore got a mean report to make on Joel Greer."

"Yeah, I shore have," Buchanan said. He told briefly all that he had to tell, and proceeded: "I'm as good as outlawed hereabouts, in spite o' all Rice can do; but I ain't leavin' the county, not even if I hafta stay here and occupy a three-by-six hole in the ground. Not brave, y'understand, kid, just contrary.

"Well, I'll be seein' you later, Johnny. Must light a rag away from here now, before them lowdown Greer deputies—"

He broke off and his teeth snapped together as a near-by scrub copse spewed five hard-bitten, slit-eyed horsemen with badges on their shirt-fronts and guns in their hands. Tom Rice had been late with his warning; for once he had been out-foxed!

"Stick 'em straight up, Buchanan," ordered the leader of the five, "or we'll drill you clean."

"I ain't swallerin' a tale like that," coolly replied Bob. His hands hadn't moved, except that one of them had tensed in readiness for dragging iron faster than it had ever dragged iron before.

"You'd drill me on the way to town, all right, after you'd took my Colt. But you ain't got nerve enough to try it here and now, with a gun on me."

"Cowboy, git 'em told," growled Sam Kelso.

"Seems to me he's done done it," Ducey Sneed said.

BILL MINTER laughed gruffly. Hot words were on the tip of Johnny Allister's tongue, when Buchanan spoke again.

"*Amigos*, this is my funeral, not yores. You fellas keep out of it. Deputies, listen. I'm now ridin' off, and I'm advisin' you not to try a shot at me. Yeah, you'd likely get me, but I'd drop two or three o' you while you was doin' it."

This was not all bluff. Bob's gun had come out of leather and to a level so quickly that it seemed sleight-of-hand performance. The five knew that Joel Greer, in the beginning, had meant to employ Buchanan solely because of his ability

to sling lead fast and straight. The presence of Sneed and the heavily-armed Kelso and Minter probably had little to do with it.

The deputies sat their horses and stared while their man calmly rode out of revolver-shot!

After Bob had crossed a line of chaparral, he put his sorrel into a fast gallop, heading toward the barren and rocky range of hills that rose to the westward. Greer's five jackals in lion's clothing screwed up their courage and followed. Their horses were exceptionally good horses. Within half an hour, Buchanan was hard pressed.

Bullets were whanging through the dust that his sorrel kicked up. A .45 slug gashed his right thigh deeply, and a warm red stream began to pour down his leg.

"Halt!" they kept shouting at him. "Halt, or we'll kill you!"

But he wouldn't. He had no doubt that they intended killing him anyway. His wound was still bleeding profusely; an hour of it, and he would likely bleed to death. He rode across a low rise, and was temporarily hidden from his pursuers.

There the cowboy fugitive came upon a nest of boulders at the edge of a gully that stretched into the hills, and decided to make a stand—unless a ruse that had occurred to him rendered a stand unnecessary.

HE dismounted beside the boulders, struck his panting horse with his hat and drove it into the gully. Snatching six cartridges from his belt to hold ready in his left hand, he drew steel with his right and sprang into cover. Perhaps they'd blow him down in the end, but they could say that they'd been in a gun fight, those of the five who were able to say anything. But if his trick worked—

It did!

The sorrel, instead of climbing the other side of the gully, turned left along the bottom and continued to run wildly. The clatter of its hoofs on loose stone carried to the ears of the deputies. Immediately they wheeled their mounts and followed the sorrel, which they could not see.

In frantic haste Buchanan fashioned a compress of his bandana and neckerchief, and stopped the bleeding of his wound. Then he stole out of the boulder nest and ran, keeping to all available shelter.

CHAPTER IV

The Trap Snaps

WHEN he reached the foot of the hills, Buchanan was almost exhausted. He caught his breath, tightened his leg bandage a trifle and began to creep southward. To get himself to a doctor was the important thing now, and it would be difficult without a horse.

He dared not expose himself in trying to locate his sorrel. Had he known that Sneed, Kelso and Minter had followed the deputies, bent upon seeing that he was not murdered—But he didn't know.

A little more than an hour later he reached a road that connected Red Rock City with a town west of the rocky range. The day had become broiling hot, and perspiration stung his eyes. He sank into the shade of a boulder.

His gaze was riveted upon the road eastward. Behind a tiny speck in the distance a thin column of dust rose. A vehicle was coming. If it was the stagecoach, he'd board it. Not many knew him. Probably he wouldn't be recognized.

The vehicle proved to be the stagecoach, and the driver reined in promptly at sight of the wounded and stranded cowboy. Buchanan was soon swinging a door open. Three of

those inside were strangers to him. The fourth passenger had a bandaged neck—it was Marsh Greer!

"Always somethin' to take the joy out o' life," growled Buchanan. "If you want to cash in, Marsh, try a double-action .38 on me!"

Fear was written in young Greer's face. He rose and opened the door opposite Bob, stepped out, climbed up to the driver's seat. He had quarreled with the old Red Rock City practitioner that morning, was on his way to see the Hartsville doctor, and hadn't told his granite-hard sire that he was going—an oversight that was to make all the difference in the world to both Greers.

The stagecoach went rocking on. Just as it entered the crooked pass that let the road through the hills, a horseman in gray, wearing a gray mask, appeared close ahead with a Colt, level in either hand.

"The Ghost Rider!" Greer barked at the driver beside him.

The brakes screeched. The vehicle stopped so quickly that those on the rear seat were piled against those on the front seat. Marsh Greer lost his head completely. Instead of elevating his hands, wisely, he jerked a new .38 from leather and fired twice.

"Got him!" shakily exclaimed the driver. "Five thousand dollars' worth!"

BOB BUCHANAN sprang out of the stagecoach in time to see the gray-clad, gray-masked figure tumble head first down to the hot dust. The horse reared and bolted. Bob uttered a smothered cry and ran to the crumpled form. He saw that the unknown had been shot in the chest, not far from the heart.

"Pardner"—in spite of himself, Buchanan choked—"pardner, you never will make it. Is there anything you want me to do for you, or do you want me to take word to somebody, or anything?"

He dropped to his knees. The eyes below the holes in the gray mask were burning queerly. There were footfalls behind Bob, and he looked around to see Marsh Greer and the driver hurrying up. Marsh bent and tore away the mask, then stepped back as white as death would ever make him. Buchanan went to his feet with a cry of the sheerest bewilderment. It was Black Rufe Lockerd!

DISSENTING voices notwithstanding, the driver started for Red Rock City with the badly wounded Black Rufe. He knew Lockerd, and reasoned that his life could be saved, if he had medical attention quickly. Buchanan remained aboard, risky as it was. His wound was bleeding again, in spite of the snug bandage, and dying with his boots on, if it came to that, was better than dying by inches in the broiling, waterless pass.

As the stagecoach went clattering into the main street, Buchanan leaped from the step. He fell, got up, ran between houses and to an alley. Before the stage had fairly come to a halt he had reached the rear door of the jail corridor, and a few seconds after that he was in Sheriff Tom Rice's office. Rice snapped to his feet.

"What in thunder are you doing here, Bob?"

In precious few words Buchanan told him. There was a hullabaloo in the street outside now. Townsmen, among them Joel Greer, were gathering about the stagecoach. The driver and Marsh Greer were lifting Rufe Lockerd from the vehicle to the warped wooden sidewalk. Old Joel recognized his fallen ace of gun-fighters, then yelled in a mighty voice:

"Who done it? Who done this?"

Tom Rice spoke quietly from his office doorway. "Mebbe yore son could tell you, Joel."

A heavy silence fell as Greer the elder faced Greer the younger. Rice spoke again: "Bob Buchanan had it figgered out right, Joel. You made a big mistake. You got Rufe to dress up like the Ghost Rider and start pullin' off general hold-ups, so as to put the real Ghost in bad with the public and the law, and didn't tell Marsh! It's yore own fault, Joel."

Old Greer's countenance had gone pasty. Black Rufe's eyes were half open and glittering. His voice came: weak, but distinct.

"You guaranteed the plan would bring results, didn't you, Joel? It did, all right—it got me killed, dang you. Tom Rice, listen. Dyin' men don't lie. I was with Joel at Badger Tail, and I seen him set that explosion off hisself—lowdown skunk—murdered dozens—dozens—"

That was all. Lockerd had passed.

Proof of Greer's diabolical villainy inflamed scores of townsmen who were already weary of his high-handed rule. There was loud talk of lynching. At this, old Joel's rage became stark madness. He produced a gun, and tried to throw down at the crowd when other guns barked.

Tom Rice sprang into action too late.

The former big man of Red Rock had gone with Black Rufe on the dark and unknown trail.

THE angry scores then ran every Greer henchman—including the faithless deputies—out of town. Next, Marsh Greer eyed a rope hard and promised that he would make full restitution to Kirby Allister's children and all others who had suffered at his father's hands.

The old practitioner cared for Buchanan's leg wound, and that evening the sheriff drove Bob out to the Allister ranch in a buckboard. Johnny and Sneed carried the wounded cowboy to the living room, and Mary Let at once became his nurse.

Then Rice turned the wick of the big oil lamp high.

"You'll mebbe think," said he, "that I've flouted the law a heap. I want to remind you that it was the only way I could see o' helpin' justice. Now, just suppose that the so-called Ghost Rider is waitin' at the gate, and I'm goin' out to send him in. See if you know him."

JOHNNY and his sister, Bob Buchanan and Ducey Sneed gaped. The sheriff grinned and went out, and shortly afterward a tall, lank man, gray-clothed and gray-masked and gray-haired, entered the living room.

Mary Let walked up to him. His eyes shone down upon her.

"I know—" the others heard her say—"that's my Daddy! He wasn't killed at all!"

Old Kirby Allister jerked his mask off and took both his children into his arms. A moment later, Tom Rice was explaining:

"You see, the man they buried as Kirb—mangled bad, he was—just didn't happen to be him. Not even Kirb knows everything that took place. His head was nearly busted in the big blow-up, and he comes to himself down in Durango months later! Then he sneaks back to me in Red Rock, finds out how Joel Greer is carryin' on, and lays his plan.

"The Ghost Rider thing depended on mystery, he figgered, and he didn't want even you and Mary Let to know, Johnny, for fear you'd accident'ly let the secret slip."

In the jubilation which followed, Kirby Allister gripped Buchanan's hand and urged him to become a fixture at the Flat A Bar.

"You'll stay on with us, Bob, won't you?" Mary Let turned to him.

He went red under his bronze. That she liked him was evident. All at once he realized that he liked her.

"Yes, ma'am, I'm shore stayin' on," came his happy answer.

The Wild Man *of* Canyon Lobo

Johnny Hooker Sure Hated the Idea of Having Any Blamed Archy-Ologers Give His Indian Cliff-Dwellings the Once Over—So Went to Head 'Em Off, But . . .

An Uproarious Hooker Brothers Story

By RAY NAFZIGER

Author of "Cowboys in the Raw," "One-Man Roadeyo," etc.

EV'RY year, after the fall round-up and the beef's been shipped off this here Hooker Bros.' cow ranch, my li'l brother Stevie and that big "One-Ton" chunk of cowhand of ours jist natcherally relaxes and sorta hibernates.

If me, Johnny Hooker, senior head of the firm of Hooker Bros., didn't ride herd on them two, nothin' would be done on the ranch till spring. Specially as our other two hands, old George and Pablo, never show no special ambishun, any time.

Jist as soon as the last steer is prodded into the car, my brother Stevie and One-Ton starts prowlin' around in their empty skulls for some excuse to git outa work. Then's when me, Johnny Hooker—or "Big Boy" Johnny Hooker as I'm better knowed—has got to start swingin' a rope end. Or else find myself saddled with all the fencin' of the hay corrals and repairin' drift fences and similar chores which can't be done handy horseback.

This year, we no sooner git back to our shack from loadin' our beef and git our horses turned in the corral, than my li'l brother Stevie, as per usual, starts figgerin' some excuse to git outa work.

"T' hell with this raisin' cows!" he says. "After a year of chousin' over these hills, what do we have left but a calloused place where we hit the saddle? We got to work our heads instead of the place where we sit down.

"Take this here canyon," he says, wavin' his hand around at Canyon Lobo. "There's a fortune in it with them old Indian cliff houses stickin' to the walls back up from here. We could advertise 'em an' charge money to come an' see 'em, an' pervide hotel accommodashuns."

"Sure!" I butts in. "And have a bunch o' lady toorists in pants and gent toorists with specs scarin' all the fat off our cow critters. Fergit it. We're fixin' that irrigation ditch tomorrer. Git yourself a shovel and wrop a piece of green rawhide around the handle so's it'll be all ready for you to bear down on it."

Stevie shies off from the idea of the shovel. "Listen here," he says. "You know, back in that Cave Creek country, we got the only big cliff-dweller village that ain't been dug into by scientists. Me an' One-Ton was talkin' to a pair o' strangers in

I feel a snake on my shoulder, an' I jumps up and lets out a yell

Sunset yesterday, college perfessers, and they want to come in and dig 'em out.

"They'll bring a whole party and we could make good money puttin' 'em up some shacks and freightin' in grub and supplies for 'em an'—"

"I said 'No!'" I bellers in a firm voice what could of called all the hogs in ten miles if they had been any porks to call. "No damn' scientifick sharps is goin' to camp round this ranch."

"But they'll pay good money jist to be allowed to dig on our land," he argues.

"Anybody crazy enough to pay money to dig up dead Indian cliff houses and run chances of fallin' offa rimrocks, ain't the sort I want on my ranch," I says. "Git ready to bend your back tomorrer on that new irrigation ditch! We got to make a showin' on this ranch like somebody 'sides a widder woman is livin here, or that bank won't renew that note this fall."

"But," says Stevie, "we could use the money from these scientifick sharps to pay off the note and—"

"I said 'NO!'" I bawls. "And when I say 'No,' I mean 'NO!' There ain't no jelly-bellies which don't know which end of a hoss the bridle goes on comin' in here. This is a cow ranch, hear me? A dignified moo cow ranch outfit what don't take no dudes or raise guinea pigs on the side!"

"I wouldn't be hasty in this, Johnny," puts in our big One-Ton

hand who's been leanin' lazy ag'in the fence. "Them college fellers we talked to got plenty money. What did they say they was? Oh, yeah, archyologers—fellers that goes around diggin' up Indian bones and pottery and fittin' 'em together."

"Some work for a grown-up man!" I remarks, bitter. "Fittin' busted Injun pie plates and shin bones together. They'll come to Canyon Lobo over my dead body."

"Well," says Stevie, "I hope you ain't that close to dyin', for I told 'em to come along here tomorrer an' look over the ground."

For one minute I sorta forgits myself. I been shovin' steers into cars since daylight and that makes for a short temper. For once, I fergits the dignity that goes with a dignified cow ranch and grabs me up a runnin' iron about three foot long.

I would have de-horned that li'l brother of mine, only the cuss tries to be cute and steps aside, trippin' me up. Stevie has picked up a pole and One-Ton he got hold of a axe handle. Of course, it wouldn't make me no difference if them boys has machine-guns, but jist in time before I explodes into action, I decides after all I'll be dignified with them boys instead o' bein' rough with 'em. I'll just ignore 'em, for if I really lose my temper, there'll be a couple of Canyon Lobo cowboys planted jist as the work is all done this fall.

BUT as to them archyologers comin' in, I ain't goin' to have it. Next mornin' I figger I'll head for "Muley" Hanks' ranch, and instead go to town and tell them archyologers in a dignified way that we don't want no perfessers and such nosin' around our camps.

Next mornin' I git them two loafers, Stevie and One-Ton, along with Pablo and old George, out early on the new irrigation ditch, usin' their shovels to throw dirt.

I'm ridin' a little salty bronc I been breakin' in kinda slow. Follerin' up Del Norte Canyon to the drift fence and climbin' out on the ridge, I drop down to the Cave River. There's been some rains and that river is up and no ford. I figgers this is a good chance to test out the salty li'l bronc I'm forkin', to see how good a swimmer he is.

TO play safe I strips off all my clothes and ties 'em on the saddle. It's hotter that day than the inside of a coke oven and I figgers a bath in the river won't do me no harm, although it's sorta later in the year than I usually takes a bath.

But I decides to take the risk and, before crossin', I anchors the bronc to a stout tree with my saddle rope and hops in.

That cold water soon gives me enough and I hops out on the bank to start walkin' toward that ornery li'l bronc. And what does he do but acts like he ain't never seen me before and don't want t' git acquainted. He snorts and rears back on that rope for all he's worth, and when he can't break it, he jumps straight ahead and butts that hammer head of his up ag'in the tree.

I admits I ain't never took no beauty prizes, either with or without my clothes, and my hair long enough to braid, besides not havin' time to shave for a while. But I guess what gits that horse most is seein' my head all tanned up and my white skin below, and it scares him to see a Mexican's head settin' up on the shoulders of a feller with a washed-out white skin.

I keeps talkin' to him while sneakin' round to come up on him from the other side, gittin' him between me and the river, but it ain't no use. He don't believe in this here new-fangled noodist fad. A naked man jist shocks the jughead down to his hoofs. He gives a squeal and a

snort and rears back on that rope till he's settin' on his tail.

It's then she happens. The hondo on that rope is kinda wore and it snaps right off. That fool bronc turns a somersault and lands on his back right in the river, with all my duds tied to the saddle.

Whilst me, I stands on that river bank with my mouth open, lookin' at the place where he went under. Purty soon he comes up, but 'stead o' swimmin', I see he's one of them floaters. That's a horse that jist swells all up with air and flops over on his side an' floats off. He'll float till he bumps up ag'in the bottom, and then he'll stand up and wade out.

I dashes into the water to see if I can't grab a bridle rein when I happens to think I been ridin' that critter with a hackamore, and when he butted his head ag'in that tree he swiped the hackamore off and it's layin' there with my rope. I wade back out and stand there on the bank watchin' that fool hoss go floatin' off around a bend in the river. The brush and rose thorns is so thick along the bank it ain't no use for me to try to foller.

IT ain't never been said Big Boy Hooker ain't equal to any emergency, but this sizes up to me like the granddad of all emergencies. Here's me, senior partner in the firm of Hooker Brothers, cattle raisers, twenty miles from the home ranch, without no hoss nor clothes nor nothin', standin' on the river bank jist like Adam, except, of course, there ain't no Eve.

It's five mile back up a rocky trail to the ridge before startin' down Del Norte, and it's fifteen mile down to the ranch. An' after I git there, it won't never do to show up before them two hyenas, One-Ton and Stevie. I'll have to sneak into the ranch when nobody's lookin' and git on some clothes. If I don't, it sure won't never be forgot how Johnny come marchin' home with nothin' on.

It only shows what you got to put up with from a brother and partner like Stevie. This is what comes from tryin' to bring in a mob of jellyfish which digs around for Injun jaw bones.

MOST of all I need boots for that stony trail. And castin' around, I think about a old cabin up the trail a mile or so, used by some fool prospector a few years back. Round that cabin I figgers is a chance to find some coverin' for my feet.

So I start back up the trail, pickin' out the soft spots, which I soon find there ain't any. I don't go very far till I gets down to think it over. I find out I got to be careful 'bout that, too.

I figgers my hands is a heap tougher than my feet account the rope callouses, so I'll use 'em, too, goin' up that rocky trail on my hands and feet, figgerin' it'll divide the weight up some. Mebbe it's queer lookin' to be goin' along on all fours, but I ain't thinkin' how I look. I only want to git to that cabin and git something on my feet.

I've jist topped the li'l rise on which the cabin is built when a yell splits the air.

"Great Caesar! Lookit that!"

I rears up on my hind laigs jist in time t' see two of these here dood prospectors from the city go bustin' through the brush.

"Hey!" I hollers, hopin' they might help me. "Hey!"

Them city birds has got some li'l packs on their backs which sticks straight out behind, they're movin' so fast. I yells some more, but my shouts is drowned out by the dead saplin's breakin' off and the rocks rollin' off the hillside until they hits the trail and pounds off.

It's plain they ain't goin' to be no

help to me, so I goes on into the cabin and take a look around. Nothin' much in the old cabin but a bunk with some straw on it, an' a old cook stove. I don't see any old shoes or a thing to use for pants until I stoop to take a look under the bunk an' digs out a pair o' sheepskin moccasins, like prospectors use in winter inside boots. It don't take me long t' git 'em laced on them sore feet o' mine.

Then, diggin' 'round through the straw on the bunk, I locate 'bout a yard o' tanned cowhide that old prospector overlooked when he moved out. At first I don't know whether to use that or what part o' me it oughta cover up, but finally I decides that with dignified people social distinkshun has the first call. So I rips off a strip an' fin'ly gits some holes gouged through the other piece an' laces it round my middle. That makes me feel better and I'm all set t' git over the hill an' back t' the ranch, where I can sneak in an' git some clothes. Then I'll catch me a hoss an' come back on the quiet to round up that fool bronc that floated off down the river.

My back's got terrible sunburned comin' up that trail, so I finds some bacon grease left in a coffee can an' I smears a little on. While I'm foolin' around doin' this, what happens but I accidentally bumps up ag'in the old rusty stove an' down comes the whole blamed stove pipe, coverin' me all over with black soot.

WELL, it looks like one thing after another with a loafer brother and a elephant cowhand. But I don't waste much time cussin' but brush most of the soot off the front with some straw and leaves it on the back where I put the grease.

I lights out up the trail an' 'bout a mile along I see that blamed cayuse o' mine has circled round and is hittin' the same trail for home. If he shows up there with my clothes tied on the saddle, the boys'll know everything.

Lucky, the drift fence will cut him off, but when comin' out at the head o' Canyon Lobo, I notice that fool hoss has turned off on a old game trail, takin' a straight shoot for the ranch. That old trail saves 'bout four miles, so I decides t' foller it too.

After gittin' all scratched up an' peelin' my shins slidin' over rimrocks, I reach the creek in the bottom an' foller this old trail, makin' purty good time considerin' the way them wool moccasins is sweatin' the hide off'n my feet.

THAT water looks mighty cool to me an' I'm thinkin' I'll stop an' bathe my feet in the cool water in the creek, when here that locoed bronc of mine rushes back up the trail like the devil is after him. He takes one look at me an' decides the devil must have a lot o' kinfolks, 'cause he takes off up the side o' the mountain, knockin' the brush flat as a snowslide an' snortin' ev'ry jump.

Let him snort. My feet's so hot it seems t' me I can feel the steam comin' up my laig, so when I come to a little sandy place, I kicks them moccasins off an' sets down an' paddles in the water an' shoves my feet into the cool sand.

About that time I hear voices down the trail. "What the hell," thinks I. "There can't be nobody in this Godforsaken hole." But I hear 'em plain, an' this time I can hear 'em plain, so I lose no time in sneakin' off into the brush, which is so thick yuh purty near got t' swim through it.

I sets down t' lace my moccasins on ag'in, an listen. From the racket of talk an' horses cloppin', yuh'd think it was a whole army. I parts the brush a little so I can peek out.

Where I'd stopped t' bathe my feet there's a li'l openin' an' purty soon these birds ride along an' stop t'

look around. Headin' 'em is my good-for-nothin' li'l Stevie brother an' that big loafer of a One-Ton. There's two other fellers, one of 'em a great big jasper saggin' down his horse, while the other's a li'l bald-headed wart.

Both them doods is wearin' high-laced boots an' ridin' britches, an' they're both loaded down with field-glasses an' cameras, an' each is carryin' a li'l pick an' shovel. I knows who they are. It's them archyologer fellers that them two worthless cowpokes has invited up to Canyon Lobo.

"From right here," orates my li'l brother Stevie, "yuh can git a good look at the first o' them old cliff houses. Right up under that big cliff up there. See?"

THE big feller slips his field-glasses out o' the holster an' takes a squint. "H'mm!" says he. "From this distance that masonry appears very ancient. However, it will require closer exam—"

"Gentlemen, gentlemen!" squeals the little feller who's got down off his horse an' is starin' down at the creek where I been walkin' round in the sand with my moccasins off. "I wonder if you can corroborate my vision in what I now behold?"

Stevie an' One-Ton an' the other feller throws theirselfs off their hosses an' comes rushin' over, but the li'l feller holds up a hand to kinda stop 'em.

"Be very careful, gentlemen!" he says. "This is most unusual. Look carefully. After you have corroborated me in the apparent outlines, I wish to make a thorough examination."

"Ah, h'mm," says the big feller, lookin' over the li'l feller's shoulder. "Most extryordinary. Yes, most astonishing.

"You men have not," says he, turnin' t' Stevie an' One-Ton, "had occasion to visit this canyon in your-er-bare feet recently, have you?"

"Who, me?" says Stevie, his eyes stickin' out like a frog's. "Say, mister, don't I look like I had good sense? Nobody would be around here barefoot. I betcha that ain't nothin' but a bear track." An' he walks over for a better look.

But gittin' a look at my prints, he lets outa yelp an' squints down at this hoof-mark puzzled, an' then looks up at the canyon rim.

One-Ton's come an' took a look too, an' he backs off an' gazes round at the canyon rim where some o' the cliff dwellings can be seen, while he's fingerin' his six-gun.

"Nobody in here," says Stevie positive. "We rounded up here two weeks ago an' nobody was found in this country."

If it wasn't for the fact that me, Johnny Hooker, has to uphold the dignity o' this outfit, I'd jumped out there an' let a yell outa me that woulda stampeded the whole outfit o' idiots down the canyon. But a man like me, head o' a respectable cow outfit, jist can't do them things.

By this time the li'l dood feller has got out a big magnifyin' glass 'bout the size o' a saucer, with a handle on it, an' is down on his knees studyin' my tracks. Actin' surprised, jist as if I don't make a track that's human.

"Most interestin'," he says, while all the time he's squintin' at them tracks through that big magnifyin' glass. Fin'ly he stands up.

THE big feller he takes out a li'l steel tape. "The footprints of a big anthropoid, beyond doubt," says the feller as he takes a few figgers down in his book. "However—h'mm—the measurements acrost the instep are decidely less than those of the Java Man, while the claws on the end of the toes, now for example, they most closely resemble those of the Great Apes."

Anthropoid! Great Apes! By Jim-

miny, when I git outa this I'll cram them names he's callin' me down his dang throat. Claws on the end o' *my* toes. I'm gittin' madder all the time, an' besides a big red ant has crawled up under my cowhide apron an' fastened his hooks in my flank. At first I come near lettin' out a yell, but manages to keep it to a grunt.

"What's that?" yells One-Ton, jumpin' up an' pullin' his gun.

But the big feller grabs his arm. "Hold your fire, man. You might kill the last survivor of an ancient race of man. A vanished race."

One-Ton puts the gun up, but he's actin' purty nervous. My li'l brother Stevie is scratchin' his chin and actin' like he does when he's tryin' t' think.

"You don't suppose it possible," says one of these archyologer fellers, "that some Indian has strayed over here from the reservation and taken up his abode in one of those cliff dwellings? Kind of a throw-back, you know, to the days when his ancestors were living in here? If so, it would be most interesting to observe his habits."

"Since I come t' think 'bout it," says Stevie, "there has been something queer in this canyon for the last two years. We lost a cow critter up here last summer. Something killed it and it looked like mebbe had hacked a chunk outa it, jist like yuh'd take and cut it out. As if a stone knife had been used to do the cuttin'."

THE danged liar. Nothin' like that ever happened. Him tryin' to kid these archyologer fellers.

"A-h, h'mm," says one of 'em. "A stone knife may perhaps be the creature's weapon. If so, it would mean a complete reversion to type. Most interesting!"

"An'," says Stevie, gittin' warmed up t' the subject, "'bout a year ago a feller was huntin' up in this canyon, an' he come down by the ranch all scairt out. Said he'd been chased by a wild man."

Another lie. Stevie's got some scheme in his mind, an' yuh can depend on it there won't be any work in that scheme either, leastaways for Stevie.

IT jist don't seem right that me, Johnny Hooker, senior pardner of Hooker Bros., has got to set an' pick big red ants off my laigs while I listens to all that dang foolishness. If the president of the bank at Sunset should happen to come up to the ranch an' find me gone and a bunch o' doods chasin' round over the range lookin' for wild men, it'd jist be too bad for Hooker Bros. He'd call our note tomorrer.

"Well," says the runt of the archyologer pair, "I would suggest now that we explore the canyon in search of more trails and make plans for the capture of this creature."

They go moseyin' off up the canyon, lookin' for more tracks, while when they're outa sight I sneak back into the trail and head for the ranch. I'm hot an' the sweat has run down an' made little streaks through the soot all over my body. I shore look wild, and I'm beginnin' to feel the same way.

Fin'ly I come out at the edge o' ranch clearin' an' take a look around. Good Golly! It looks like a whole army is camped right in our front yard. Li'l Stevie's work, what he'd kinda fergot to mention to me the night before.

There's two big tents an' a little one an' a couple autos and a truck. I guess the little one is the cook tent, 'cause I see a stove pipe stickin' outa the top. A table an' some camp chairs is settin' out in front o' one o' the others. I don't see nobody around, but I hear noises from the tents.

It looks like as good a time as any to sneak in an' git me some

clothes. Stevie has the archyologers up the creek, an' old George an' Pablo is prob'ly slingin' dirt outa that new ditch down round the bend. I slip through the brush an' git the house 'tween me an' the tents. But there ain't no doors on that side o' the house. I'll have to run to the front side facin' the tents to git in.

I'm jist sneakin' round the corner o' the house when right outa a tent two female doods come walkin'. They ain't more'n twenty foot away an' I make a dash for the door, thinkin' 't git in the house 'fore they see me. I don't do it. I'm hightailin' it along when they bust out.

"Yee— Heeee— Eeeee— Ooooo— Heeee-lup!" they yells, an both make a dash to git back in the tent at the same time. Natcherally they got to knock the tent pole down an' the whole affair flops down on top o' them. After which they screeches fit to wake the dead.

I'm inside the door by this time, but I know it ain't goin' to do me no good, 'cause I can hear Pablo an' old George answers that yell from right close. They're poundin' toward the house an' I got to git outa there right now. There's still a chance to keep the boys from findin' out about this here wild man stuff.

THERE ain't even a pair o' overalls to grab in a hurry; nothin' 'cept a rope which I jerks off a nail, an' makes a jump for the door an' outside it, to land right straddle o' Pablo. I knock Pablo back ag'in old George who's follered him, an' we all go down in a heap. Me, I lights runnin' an' I make a bee line for the trail back up the creek, which is over behind the cook tent.

About that time a blamed colored cook with a white apron an' a little white cap settin' on his head steps outa the cook tent. He's got a big pan o' somethin' in one hand an' a spoon in the other, but when he sees me tear outa the house an' knock old George an' Pablo for a goal, he slams the pan an' spoon down on the ground an' dives back in the tent, yellin' louder'n all the rest.

He musta knocked over a table full o' pans an' dishes from the noise, and then he comes right out the other end o' that blamed tent, tearin' a hole in it big enough t' git a hoss through. He takes right out up the trail ahead o' me, an' purty soon he looks back over his shoulder an' sees me comin'—an' I ain't losin' no time.

"Good Lawd A'mighty!" he bellers. An' he musta been strollin' along before that, 'cause now he jist fades away, quittin' the trail to go tearin' down through the brush.

I AIN'T slowed down none myself, 'cause I can hear Pablo an' old George yellin' back down the trail an' knows they'll grab their guns first thing. Even while I'm runnin' I'm thinkin'; as me, Johnny Hooker, I'm always usin' my brains to figger myself outa some tight place.

I got sense 'nough to realize it ain't goin' to be no use in tryin' to slip in that ranch house ag'in. My on'y chance now is to ketch that fool hoss o' mine, if he's still up there in the canyon, if them doods an' Stevie an' One-Ton ain't run acrost him. That's why I grabbed up that rope in the house.

I'm pantin' considerable by the time I come to the drift fence, an' I slow down. But not for long. I hear a hoss comin' up the trail lickety-split after me—either old George or Pablo. So I dives off in the brush.

As the hoss comes in sight, I see it's Pablo, with two six-guns buckled round his waist an' a Winchester rifle across the saddle in front of him. He's keepin' his eyes peeled, an' about the time he gits close to where I'm layin' in the brush, he pulls his hoss up and stops t' lissen.

About that time I hear a racket

up the trail a little ways an' Pablo hears it too. He swings his rifle up to his shoulder an' pulls the hammer back. That Mex is shore scared, an' I can hear him whisperin' to hisself, "May the saints witness, this wild man shall die now, by the hand of Pablo, yes!"

About that time the two doods an' Stevie an' One-Ton come rattlin' down the trail. It's gittin' near dark an' they're travelin' fast. Pablo yelps and clatters out an' begins jabberin' fast.

"A wild man!" he says. "He has wreck the camp an' try to keel me, Pablo, and old George. He—"

"Tut, tut!" says the big archyologer. "You've merely been imaginin' things."

"No, *señor.* We hear the *señoras* scream an' we have run to help them when this wild man—I call the saints to witness—attacks us and hurls us to the ground—*pfff.* Just like that. He is so very beeg, *señor,* more than seex feet tall an' covered with hair—"

"What did I tell yuh?" says my li'l brother Stevie. "A genuine wild man runnin' in this canyon!"

THAT boy is seein' a chance to interest these perfessers into spendin' money on the hunt. And if there's any money in sight that don't take elbow grease, he'll kiss a corpse.

"It's just possible, gentlemen," says the li'l feller, "that this Spanish gentleman saw our anthropoid, perhaps frightened by or else visiting the ranch in search of food."

"May the Saints witness!" says Pablo. "The *señors* they are scare'. The tent she fall down and the dark *hombre* that prepares the food, she has queet the flat. Thees wild man, she is even now pursuin' the dark *muchacho* through the brush, an, the cook-tent she is wreck too. *Securo,* a wild man."

"I suggest," says li'l spectacles, excited, "that we proceed at once to camp."

I'm layin' as quiet as I can in a bunch o' leaves an' hopin' there ain't none o' them big red ants around here, when all a-sudden I feel a snake slitherin up over my shoulder. That's more'n even a fella with calm nerves like mine can stand, an' I jumps up and lets out a yell that would make old Geronimo turn over in his grave.

I SEE too late it's only a garter snake, but I'm so startled I jumps right out in the trail above the whole bunch an' they git one look at me before I hops into the brush. Lucky, it's too dark to reckernize me, but Pablo's hoss stampedes down the canyon an' runs right through the drift fence gate, an' that bunch o' fools right behind him. And they don't stop either.

I dropped my rope when that dang snake crawled up on my shoulder, so I goes back up in the brush an' gits that. Then I goes down to the broken drift fence gate an' fixes it to keep that locoed bronc o' mine from gittin' through to home.

It's good an' dark by this time an' I ain't got no chance o' catchin' that hoss even if he does come down ag'in the fence, so I hunts me a place under the rimrock to spend the night. It's a good thing the weather is still hot, for I ain't got no matches to build a fire.

And, man, am I tired and mad? It's shore been one hectic day, and for two cents I'd dissolve the pardnership between me and Stevie. A feller can stand so much and no more.

'Long in the night I hear that fool hoss o' mine come down to the fence an' walk back an' forth, huntin' a way to git through. Next mornin' I sneaks down an' snares him with my rope' 'fore he can git away. He's still scairt loco an' I have to throw an' hogtie him 'fore I can git up close

'nough t' git my clothes off the saddle.

It don't take me long t' git rid o' that wild man's outfit in favor of white man's clothes. After that I goes down t' the creek an' scrubs my hands an' face as good as I can. Then I forks that dang bronc an' skirts round the ridge so I can come into the ranch by the regular trail.

When I comes ridin' up, Stevie comes over from where he's been talkin' with them tenderfeet. I notice they got the tents up ag'in an' the nigger has come back, but he's keepin' his eyes rolled for more wild men.

"Why, hello there, Johnny," says Stevie. "You shore missed a lot of excitement by bein' away."

"Yeah," I says, sour. "But that won't be nothin' to the excitement we has today when I start chasin' off them archyologers."

"A WILD man was in their camp," goes on Stevie, payin' me no attention. "And these here scientifick sharps is willin' to pay us well for the privilege of investigatin' the feller, besides makin' a survey of our big cliff dweller ruins."

"Not on yore life!" I bellers. "That's all a fool yarn about a wild man. They ain't no such animile. They're leavin' damn' quick."

"Well," says Stevie, "mebbe you're right, Johnny. Mebbe there ain't been no wild man—only some loco cowboy what lost his hoss an' clothes some way an' hid around, figgerin' if the boys got on to him, they'd laugh at him for the next ten years. Mebbe we ought to investigate that angle and see what cowboy it was goin' around in his birthday suit."

HE'S lookin' at me kinda funny Stevie is, and mebbe the coot has more brains than I suspect an' has guessed more'n he lets on. Mebbe he knows dang well who the wild man was, and he's threatenin' to spread the story around unless I agree to let them birds come to our ranch.

"Yes," goes on Stevie with his eye on me. "I think it might be best to allow these coots to pay us money for the privilege of huntin' this wild man and lookin' over our cliff dwellin's. We could use the money for hirin' some huskies to do the heavy work around the ranch this winter, such as diggin' irrigation ditches. What do you say, Johnny?"

This looks like it's 'nother emergency where Johnny Hooker has got to use his brains.

"Huh!" I says. "Considerin' it from all angles, mebbe we had better let 'em stick around.

"After all," I orates, "it ain't goin' to be said that Johnny Hooker is one to hold up the wheels of progress when it comes to corralin' scientifick facts."

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HORSE-BACK RIDING MADE EASY

By
Colonel Jno. J. Boniface
United States Cavalry

IN PREVIOUS articles we have discussed the initial training of horse and rider; riding at the walk and trot; riding at the lope, canter, gallop and run; riding on the open range, and artificial gaits. Now we shall go on to

6. Riding Over Jumps and Riding Bucking Horses

FIRST, we must take up the matter of saddles and bridles, for there are various sorts and used for different kinds of riding. The cowboy uses a big, heavy stock saddle, often weighing around forty pounds and having, on its pommel, a strong "horn" to be used in his roping of cattle and horses.

There is no other type of saddle which would so suit the cowboy's work. It is a very comfortable saddle to both horse and rider. It is used in two ways as to cinching—the "single-rigged" and the "double-rigged." This means: the single-rigged saddle has but one cinch, while the double-rigged has two, a front and rear one. Each is excellent, and it is a matter of preference.

The Cavalry Saddle

Then we have the McClellan cavalry saddle which is used by our Regular cavalry. This saddle weighs but seventeen pounds and, like most stock saddles, is open down its seat, in the middle, lengthwise, to permit coolness on the horse's back. This saddle is the outgrowth of many years of plains' riding by our cavalry and is thoroughly comfortable and remarkably durable. The life of a good cowboy stock saddle should be about thirty years or more.

The cavalry saddle has been developed largely to fulfil one imperative demand, outside of its comfort to horse and man, and that is, the packing of the saddle on field service. The full pack of the Regular cavalryman weighs ninety-one pounds and all this must be fastened to the pommel and cantle of his saddle.

The Flat Saddle

The other saddle which we must consider is what is known as the "flat" (or English) saddle. This is the one habitually used by the civilian riders in park riding, cross-country riding and in taking high and broad jumps. This type of saddle was adopted for official use by cavalry officers in our service, some years ago. While it was not, at first, to be packed for field service, this has gradually come about, and now it is so made and arranged that it, too, can be packed for an officer's field service. When not packed, the saddle weighs about the same as the McClellan cavalry saddle.

This is the type of saddle, also, that is always used in polo, in horse-shows and in teaching equitation in riding schools.

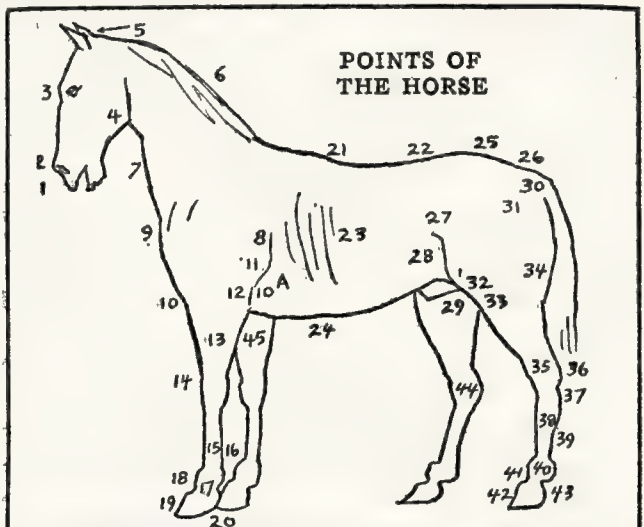
Each class of riders feels very strongly that its type of saddle is the very best, and often regards the other types with unjustifiable scorn. One should maintain an open mind, and learn how to ride in each.

Styles in Bridles

And as to bridles: Cowboys use a curb bit and a single-reined bridle. Our cavalry and the civilian riders hold to the curb bit with double reins.

The second set of reins are attached to a snaffle bit, which lies just above and behind the curb bit when the two bits are in the horse's mouth.

Riders accustomed to one of these two styles rarely change to liking the other kind. Both have good points, and the rider should learn how to use both sorts.



1, Muzzle; 2, Nostrils; 3, Forehead; 4, Point of jaw; 5, Poll (part between the ears); 6, Crest (where mane is); 7, Throttle (windpipe); 8, Shoulder blade; 9, Point of shoulder; 10, Bosom or breast; 10a, Chest; 11, True arm; 12, elbow; 13 Forearm; 14, Knee; 15, Cannon bone; 16, Back sinew; 17, Fetlock or pastern joint; 18, Coronet (around top of hoof); 19, Hoof; 20, Heel (or buttress); 21, Withers; 22, Back; 23, Ribs (forming "barrel"); 24, Girth (circumference of chest); 25, Loins; 26, The croup. 27, Hip; 28, The flank; 29, Sheath; 30, The dock (root of tail); 31, Hip joint (whirlbone); 32, Stifle joint; 33, Lower thigh (gaskin); 34, The quarters; 35, The hock (hind knee); 36, Point of hock; 37, The curb place; 38, Cannon bone; 39, Back sinew; 40, Fetlock or pastern joint; 41, Coronet (around top of hoof); 42, Hoof or foot; 43, Heel; 44, Spavin place; 45, Chesnut.

An Art in Itself

Riding over jumps is an art in itself and requires long practice, but it is one of the most fascinating forms of riding. Like flying, it gets in one's blood. There are two forms used by riders when jumping. One of them is to maintain the body so that it is always perpendicular to the ground.

That is, the rider leans *slightly* forward as the horse rises to the jump, becomes more erect and wholly so as the horse passes over the jump, and leans slightly backward as the horse starts downward and straightens erect again when the horse lands. The other form is being more used now than the first form. This second form consists in the rider's leaning forward over the horse's neck as the horse goes at the jump, retaining this leaning forward position as the horse rises, as it passes over the jump and even as it lands, then straightening up into an almost vertical seat.

Both the "vertical" form and the "crouch" form have very strong advocates.

One should practice both, then adopt the form which seems the better suited to the individual.

In all broad and high jumping, as at horse shows and across country, most civilian and cavalry riders hold a rein in each hand, with their hands low against the horse's withers (shoulders), and use a quite short stirrup.

Cowboy Jumps

The cowboy almost never jumps very high jumps, though often having to take broad ones over ditches and the like. He generally keeps his reins in one hand and sits erect, but with complete flexibility. His friction (grip with his thighs) is very powerful, from constant hard riding over rough country.

In taking up jumping, either high or broad, the new rider should select a horse known to jump well and willingly. Then he should practice taking very low jumps, with and without stirrups—jumps, at first, not over a foot high or two feet wide. Not until the rider and horse go over these

easily, should the height or width be increased, and then only gradually.

Trotting and jumping without stirrups, over low jumps, has the greatest value here in gaining balance, friction and self-confidence. It should be practiced a very great deal, before the jumps are raised. In jumping, the rider's lower legs should go back, not forward, and clinch the horse firmly just back of the cinch, being sure to

The Take-Off of a Leap

keep the spurred heels *outward* so as not to scratch the horse.

Don't Turn in Heels

In *all* riding, a daily effort must be made to keep the rider's foot as near parallel to the horse's body as possible. The tendency is to turn in the heels, causing the spurs to scrape the horse and make him nervous and uncertain. And turning in the heels places the *backs* of the rider's thighs against the horse, when it is the *inner* sides of the thighs which should do so, so as to allow the adductor muscles to come into play in gripping.

The average good horse, when trained as a willing jumper, should clear a high jump of about two-and-a-half feet and a broad jump of four.

Safety First

Many will clear three feet or three and a half, and a six or eight foot broad jump. Some, exceptional, will clear four or five feet and a broad jump of sixteen feet. And, at the top, we come to the very exceptional jumper that will go above these figures. The internationally-known "Heatherbloom" cleared something like seven feet in a high jump. But a horse should never be forced beyond his capacity. A safe jump is better than a broken neck.

The time arrives when a rider has gained such a firm seat and so much confidence, that he wishes for other worlds to conquer; and that world lies open before him—the bucking horse.

He can be had all over our West, and many have been shipped to Eastern markets.

"Cow Hops"

It is wise for the rider to select, at first, a horse known to pitch very mildly, very gently, making what we Westerners call "cow hops"—small bucks without much real violence. The saddle should be carefully examined and well cinched onto the horse.

Some riders have learned buck-riding by "hobbling" their stirrups for awhile, at first. That is, tieing the two stirrups together by a rope or strap passed under the horse's belly.

The horse, saddled and bridled (no bit used, but a hackamore instead—a sort of rope halter around the horse's nose), should be held, for the learner, by other men until the rider is firmly seated in his saddle (stock saddle type) and has his feet firmly in his stirrups and the hackamore rope grasped in one hand tightly.

It is well to begin learning buck-riding inside of a corral, so as not to be dragged if thrown, and always to mount only when other men are at hand to help. Sometimes, the horse is first blindfolded and the blind snatched off as the horse is turned loose. The expert rider is expected to stay on without "grabbing leather" (gripping the saddle horn), but, for the new rider at this dangerous game, it is suggested that he grip anything in sight when he feels himself going—and pray hard!

TRAILS APART

Bill Grabow was Due to Stretch Rope—But a "Danged Outlaw" Stepped in and Took Him From John Law

By STEPHEN PAYNE

Author of "Silent Cowbell," etc.

BILL GRABOW, riding north along a narrow valley, heard a rifle crack four times in succession. The big cowpuncher fed his mount the steel, zipped around a bend in time to see a man writhing on the ground and a horse with empty saddle running away. On the brushy hillside to the left rose puffs of smoke.

While Bill reined up in horrified amazement, he saw a man, wearing a big white hat, fork a pony and fuzz away westward.

"A bushwhackin' killer!" gritted Bill, and jerking his saddle carbine out of its scabbard, he tried to get a bead on the vanishing *malo hombre.*

But the country was rough and wooded, and the fellow disappeared too quickly for the cowpuncher to line his sights.

Mounting, Bill loped to the fallen man, hoping he might be able to do something. But four rifle bullets had plowed through the old codger, who looked like a rancher. His horse had skeedaddled up the valley and out of sight. Bill Grabow rolled a smoke, pondering what to do.

It was now noon of his second day

With the impact of the savage blow, the fellow was lifted backwards off his feet

out from the J J outfit's spread, some sixty miles south of here. He was on his way to Jurg Donaldson's ranch, still ten or fifteen miles to the north, where he was to get a Percheron stallion that his boss had bought.

Six-foot-one the cowpuncher stood, broad of shoulder, lean of hip, lithe and active as a panther; a hundred and ninety pounds of steel-hard, first-class fighting man. Light chestnut hair, a big, slightly hooked nose, a purposeful jaw, a steel-trap mouth, gray eyes with steely glints in them, attested as much; though he was peaceful enough if let alone, and certainly never carried a chip on his shoulder.

Now, however, the steel glints shone, the steel-trap mouth set, the prominent jaw jutted forward. He forked his gray, rode up the hillside where the bushwhacker had been hidden, examined tracks, and set out on the killer's trail.

Hilly, brushy country. Giant mountains on the western skyline; hills to north and south, criss-crossed by valleys and gulches. In the hills, grazing horses and cattle. Far away eastward, on more open, level country, a small town was visible.

THE *malo hombre* had fled almost in a straight route westward along a ridge. A mile. Two miles. Three. Bill saw his quarry and knew the man had seen him. Bad for Bill Grabow.

The big cowpuncher knew he was taking chances, with the odds ten to one in favor of the other man, who could "bush up" and drop his pursuer from cover.

But he pushed right on, carbine gripped in his right hand, eyes grim and wary.

Bill's gray turned its head and cocked an inquiring ear. The puncher looked back. There were five men on his trail, riding as if a swarm of yellow-jackets buzzed at their horses' tails. Riding like man-hunters after a hunted man. What man?

In another minute Bill Grabow decided it was he himself those jaspers hunted. Two of them reined up, turned their ponies a little sideways, and from long range cut loose at the big cowpuncher with rifles. *Spang! Spang!*

Bullets bit rock, none too far from Bill's gray.

"Plenty snorty," allowed Bill. "I'd admire to palaver with them jaspers, but they ain't in no such humor. They figger I kilt that ol' codger. They ain't seen the white-hatted reptile on the black hoss what I'm chasin'."

OF course, the five had found the body, sighted Bill fogging away up country, and had jumped to conclusions. Riding cracking good hosses, they were. Better ponies than Bill's gray, which was tired from a hard jaunt yesterday.

The puncher used his spurs hard. Where was that human coyote—his quarry? He searched the ground ahead, to the right and to the left.

"Cyclones in hell!" he swore. "I've passed the spot where I saw him last, and I've lost his trail."

Spread out wide apart, all riding hell-bent, the pursuers swept forward. They were less than half a mile distant. Bill scowled. Small chance of his capturing the white-hatted killer and thus proving his own innocence. He didn't know this country, or he might hide from five man-hunters. But as it was—

"They'll get me sooner or later," gritted Bill. "I'll h'ist a white rag, try to tell 'em the truth."

His horse labored up a small cone-shaped hill, stopped at the top, and Bill swung off. He had no white rag, but raising his arms high, he stood in plain sight, an open target should the five be minded to shoot.

They thundered up, trained rifles

and six-shooters on the big cowpuncher.

"Come down here," snapped a command. "Keep your fists up!"

Bill walked down to the five, all cowboys, stormy-eyed, grim-lipped, red-hot mad. One went to get the puncher's horse and carbine. Another took Bill's Colt.

"Boys, I'll tell you how come I got in on this," the puncher began. "The *hombre* what shot that ol' gent is shovin' country behind his hoss, gettin' plum' away. I came ridin'—"

"Shut up!" bellowed a stocky, barrel-chested rider with two weeks' growth of black whiskers on his heavy face. "We know who yuh are—a hired killer workin' for Jurg Donaldson. Ye-ah, Jurg hired you to get ol' Clem Goodnight. Yuh got Clem a'right, but yuh didn't get away!"

Bill stared at the speaker. "I don't know Donaldson—yet. It was Goodnight who was shot?"

"Yes. We work for him—the C Slash C outfit. That carbine's been shot? Dirty, ain't it, Slim?"

"Shore, Lance. It's been shot recent."

"Last night I blowed the heads offen three grouse for my supper an' breakfast," explained Bill.

"Search the killer, Slim," ordered Lance, he of the black whiskers.

ON Bill, Slim found three hundred dollars in bills—cash he was to pay Jurg Donaldson for the stallion.

"Blood money!" snapped Lance, savagely.

"The jack he got in advance for dry-gulchin' Clem," announced a husky, red-faced waddy.

"We're wastin' time," the fourth cowboy rumbled hotly. "String him up. Then to Donaldson's ranch and hang Donaldson, too!"

"Must be a range war on here," Bill remarked coolly.

"One was shore brewin'. It's busted loose now that Donaldson's hired you and you killed Clem."

"But I told you I didn't kill—"

"Big tree up yonder in the gully. On your horse!"

Had not four guns covered him, Bill would have cleaned house then and there. As it was, he was forced to mount. His hands were tied behind his back, and his horse was led to a shaggy old pine with one limb suitable for the grim business at hand.

BILL GRABOW possessed more sand than any ordinary cowboy, but he didn't like this idea at all. He talked as never had he talked before, but he could not convince the C Slash C cowboys he was talking straight.

Soon a rope was over a limb, the noose around Bill's neck, and Lance was set to whip Bill's gray out from under him when—

"Grab clouds! Get 'em high!"

Out of the brush directly to the south of the C Slash C rannies and their victim rose six roughly clad men, hard-faced, tough lookers, who had reached their vantage position by crawling down a deep, dry watercourse.

Six drawn six-shooters confronted the thunderstruck cowboys. Up went their hands.

"Hell's bells!" gasped Lance. "I never seen you toughs afore. Donaldson must ha' brought in a hull crew of fightin' men."

"Donaldson?" queried a tall, dark fellow with piercing black eyes. "We don't know him. Introducin' myself, I'm Torpedo Adams, outlaw. These is part of my band."

"Torpedo Adams!" gulped black-whiskered Lance. "I've heard tell of you and plenty. Never expected to see yuh though. Say, Torpedo, us cowboys was hangin' a danged killer. I don't figger you outlaws orter interfere."

"A killer, eh?" said the outlaw

chief. "So much the better. I always need killers. Wasp, take the rope off that prisoner, get him away from those fool cowpunchers. Jake, you and Ben collect shootin' irons and the like. Stand hitched, punchers!"

IN less than ten minutes Bill Grabow was riding away with the six outlaws, each cowboy having been securely tied to a separate tree or bush. The bandits had all of the cowboys' horses, guns and ammunition, tobacco and money, including the three hundred dollars taken from Bill.

The cowpuncher was concerned about that cash, which he needed to pay for the stallion. Naturally he was dumbfounded by what had taken place, but how relieved. He felt of his neck and said to Torpedo Adams:

"First time I ever was in debt to a bandit. Why'd you save my hide?"

The tall, dark outlaw showed even white teeth in a flashing smile and tapped his right-hand saddle pocket.

"I carry field glasses. Saw you on top of that cone. You looked to be a jasper that'd make me a good hand. Stood to reason, a man chased by either a posse or a bunch of red-hot cowboys was on the dodge, had done somethin' as put him outside the law. We did some Injun stalking—"

"I 'preciate your hornin' in. But, old head, I ain't really on the dodge. Which reminds me, we're headin' the wrong direction. I got to go northeast, to Jurg Donaldson's ranch, to take home a stud hoss."

"You ain't on the dodge?" Torpedo's piercing black eyes bored Bill's steel-gray ones. "But them cowpunchers was sure goin' to hand you the atmosphere jig. Why?"

Bill told about the murder he had witnessed and his pursuit of the killer who had vanished.

"The cur rode a black horse, wore a white hat. That C Slash C foreman, Lance, said there was a range war brewing. Said Donaldson had hired this killer to get Clem Goodnight and that hell'd pop now. I still think I ought to run down that cold-blooded snake, though them C Slash C men would do their darndest to grab him if they knew he did it."

Torpedo Adams cuddled his chin with his left hand—slim, long-fingered—but hard and calloused and brown. His men shifted uneasily in their saddles, sullenly watching the back trail. Each of these five men now led a C Slash C horse. Bill felt troubled about those ponies which the outlaws were stealing.

"You tell a pretty straight yarn," said Torpedo thoughtfully. "I took it for granted you'd be tickled to join forces with me. You're free to ride with us, Bill—" he had learned the cowboy's name—"but I dunno if you're free to ride away."

"Shucks, I won't turn you in. My lips are buttoned." Bill grinned disarmingly.

"THERE'S a queer thing about this killing of Clem Goodnight and Donaldson's getting the credit for it," resumed the outlaw, smiling wryly. "One of my men, Cass, killed Goodnight."

"He had plenty of good reasons!" blurted a burly, buck-toothed *hombre*, who averted his eyes as Torpedo threw him a glance.

"We're heading south, Bill," Torpedo went on. "Things got plenty hot farther north. In fact, there was a big force hell-bent after us. I reckon we lost 'em. We didn't care about havin' anybody see us on our trek, but last night Cass remarked he was in striking distance of an enemy of his—Clem Goodnight."

"Cass was dead right in hatin' Clem," growled another bandit, a slender, red-faced fellow with a sun-

burn scab on his nose and terribly raw lips. "Goodnight put Cass in the pen."

Again Torpedo silenced the speaker with a look.

"I vetoed Cass' proposal," he went on. "Told him we hadn't time for his personal quarrels. A killing would get a lot of ringy cowpokes on our trail. He sneaked away during the night. He rides a black horse, wears a big white hat, carries a high-powered rifle. He shot Goodnight all right. Wasp, didn't you tell me Cass said he'd meet us along here somewhere?"

"That's what he said," was the surly response.

BILL realized there was almost open hostility between the outlaw chief and his men. Torpedo seemed not to notice, but Bill knew that he did, without apparently doing so.

"I'd 'a' done like Cass," Wasp continued, "if I'd got in strikin' distance of the man what sent me over the road."

"I'm sure you would, Wasp," Torpedo shrugged.

Tall, lithe, with dark face, arresting eyes, straight nose and firm-lipped mouth, Torpedo was a striking fellow. Bill felt strangely attracted to him. Something doggoned likable about the hard-bitten cuss. The type that would fascinate a youth—or a woman.

Probably, Bill thought, Torpedo had found the ordinary adventures of life too humdrum and tame. Bill could sympathize. He himself had often felt an urge for the wild life and the owl hoot trail.

"I'm mighty glad you kinda cleared things up for me," said Bill. "Now it strikes me somebody should tell them snorty C Slash C rannies a few things. Donaldson, too, afore the two outfits get flying at each other's throats."

Torpedo grinned at Bill mockingly, sardonically. "Range wars make work for men of our kind—gunmen. I wonder which side would pay the most?"

"Oh, hell!" snorted the cowpuncher. "I don't see eye to eye with you jaspers at all. I'll shoot a man in self-defense, but I've no use for blood and gore without a reason. I hate a back-shootin' reptile that'll hide in the brush and mow a man down from long range."

His eyes swept defiantly around the outlaw band, finally coming to rest upon Torpedo Adams.

"I'm speakin' of Cass," Bill plunged on, aware from expression and manner that five of the six outlaws present had no use for him. "Torpedo, do you back up a man of yours when he pulls such a low-down, snake-in-the-grass trick as Cass'?"

"No," said Torpedo slowly. "Cass will be shot. You can shoot him, Bill."

Gasps from the five surly bandits.

"I'll be glad to," announced the astonished puncher, "provided we both get an even break."

"By grab, Bill, I like you," said Torpedo, his eyes glowing strangely. "You'd do to take along. Boys, yonder comes Cass to meet us, wondering why we don't ramble along."

CASS, who rode a sweaty black horse and wore a big white hat, was a thick-set individual with a big round head, light hair, and a yellowish skin which neither tanned nor sunburned. His coarse, brutal face showed a jagged scar running from left temple to jawbone, and his eyes were the unblinking yellowish orbs of a reptile. Under his left saddle fender he carried a scabbard rifle.

There was silence among the outlaws as he rode up to the group. Silence, and strange, strange looks. Bill felt a deathly tension. He wished

he had a gun. But Torpedo had not yet handed back his Colt.

"Here I be," said Cass in a thick, guttural voice. "And I done 'er, like I said I'd do 'er." He looked at the extra ponies and at Bill, gave an involuntary start. "What's that *hombre* doin' here?" he demanded.

"Ever see Bill before, Cass?" asked Torpedo.

"Ye-ah, I got a good squint at him and his hoss. He rid into the valley, jus' as I downed Clem Goodnight, an' he lit out after me. I give him the slip. I think five cowboys caught him. They shore wasn't far behind him. Where'd you *hombres* collect the ponies?"

Torpedo glanced at Bill.

"Check!" he said. "Your yarn was true." He raised his voice. "Cass, you disobeyed orders last night. You broke one rule of this band by sneaking off without leave; another by shootin' an unarmed man in the back. You're goin' to have a chance, though, to fight for your worthless life. You and Bill here will fight it out. I hope Bill kills you, but if you kill him you can go, alone. Colts at thirty paces. Get ready."

Bill sat his horse at Torpedo's right, Wasp at the bandit chief's left, the three facing Cass. Ahead of Bill, at his left, their ponies turned sideways towards him, were lined up the other four outlaws.

AS Torpedo ceased speaking, things happened — happened with the suddenness of the zigzag of lightning. The outlaw chief's eyes were riveted on the yellow-skinned renegade, Cass. He was not watching Wasp.

"Watch out, Torp!" suddenly yelled Bill.

Too late! Wasp's Colt had cleared leather, swung up, and crashed down on Torpedo Adams' head. The boss outlaw swayed in his saddle, his right hand automatically gripping his own weapon. But as his horse lunged wildly ahead, Torpedo toppled from his saddle.

Simultaneously with Wasp's move, Cass' .45 came from its holster, a streak of flame spurting from its muzzle towards the falling outlaw. Plunging, snorting horses. Chaos.

"Take that!" Cass' harsh, bull-like voice roared. "Yuh've bossed this gang long enough. Boys 'greed with me 'twould be a showdown when I met up with yuh again today, Torpedo. I'm boss now."

BILL heard the words. He had made a grab at Torpedo's six-gun. But the outlaw had gripped that weapon so tightly that Bill couldn't get it, so the puncher threw himself full upon Wasp.

There was an instant of terrific struggle, a pitching horse, and Wasp and Bill hit the ground. Dust. Oaths. Horses speeding away—the stolen C Slash C ponies as well as others with saddles. Four bandits afoot now, rushing to Wasp's aid, Cass still mounted, Torpedo Adams lying inert.

Out of the dust rose Bill, hatless, shirt half ripped from his great torso, a six-shooter in his hand. Four bandits were almost upon him. He leaped back, turned a trifle and sent one swift shot at Cass.

Simultaneously the yellow-skinned renegade fired at Bill, the bullet nicking the puncher's left ear. But Bill's leaden slug ripped a furrow across Cass' round skull, and he reeled out of his saddle as his horse whirled.

Instantly the other four bandits were upon the big cowpuncher. One dived for his legs; a second caught his gun wrist; a third leaped, with gun upraised, to get behind him. The fourth drove his fist at Bill's jaw and missed. But that flying tackle at his legs brought Bill down.

His left fist swung up, crashed against the neck of the man who, also down, was gripping his gun wrist. The man went limp. Bill's Colt

thudded to the head of the bandit who vised his legs. Up bounded the cowboy, battle-light flaming in his steel-glinted eyes.

Out lashed his boot to the stomach of the man he'd slugged in the neck, and the bandit doubled in a knot. Two outlaws were still on their feet. One swung a clubbed gun at Bill's head. The other leaped back and fired. Bill scarcely felt the bullet rip skin along a rib on his left side. He'd ducked the wild swing to his skull.

Now his body straightened, and his rock-hard left fist drove straight to the gun-swinger's face. Blood spattered from a flattened nose as the fellow was lifted backwards and smashed the earth.

Bill pivoted to face the last man still on his feet. This bandit's Colt belched smoke and flame. He fired three times as swiftly as he could cock his single-action weapon and press trigger. Yet so swiftly was Bill moving that only one bullet touched him.

THE cowboy seemed to have forgotten he held a gun himself. Like a charging bull he rushed the outlaw, who suddenly took to his heels. But Bill was upon him, his weight and impetus driving the bandit to earth, while he dropped his gun to slug the fellow twice.

To his feet sprang the big cowpuncher, glaring about him through the dust. Seven outlaws were laid out. Two, however, showed signs of getting troublesome mighty quick, so Bill rushed them. He caught one by the legs. The other pounced on his back and tried to gouge his eyes.

Bill swung the one by the legs and let him go, brought up his hands, gripped the man on his back by the hair of his head and by one ear, and yanked. A shriek of mortal agony. Followed the thump, thump, thump of Bill's fists striking flesh and bone. Horribly battered of face, that outlaw was laid out for the count.

Bill sped to the fellow he had thrown aside, knocked him down just as he was getting up, sat on his head and ground his face into the dirt while he deftly tied the bandit's hands behind his back with his own bandana. Again Bill rose, his battle-wild eyes taking in the scene.

"Hell! I got 'em all licked," he panted.

IT was at Cass he looked first. Cass, the killer, stunned by a well-aimed shot that had ripped a slight furrow along his skull. This had not been merely a lucky shot. Bill had aimed to put Cass out, not kill him, for he needed that reptile alive. Bill tied Cass and all the others except Torpedo Adams. Then only was he safe to look at the outlaw chief.

Torpedo Adams wasn't dead. Cass' bullet had missed him, but he had been stunned by Wasp's blow to his skull. Now he sat up, holding his head in his hands, rubbing his eyes and taking in the situation.

The shirt was now entirely ripped from Bill's body; his undershirt was slashed and crimson, his face dirty and bloody, hands gory.

"Hello, Bill," said Torpedo. "Wasp hit me, didn't he? I kinda sensed he was swingin' at me. Then all went black."

"Wasp hit you, Torp, but I hit him—hard. He ain't come to yet."

Torpedo looked around again. Then he gazed steadily at Bill:

"Who helped you lay 'em all out?"

"Who can be comin'?" Bill answered. "I hear a lot of horses."

"Posse, maybe," said Torpedo. "On our trail was a right sizable one what didn't care particular for county or state lines. I figgered I'd ditched 'em, though. Bill," the black eyes met those of the big cowpuncher, "my head's achin' so I can't fight nor run, nor hardly think. You won't

let 'em have me? I like the open country an' the stars at night." The voice trailed off. Bill frowned.

"I'm in a hell of a quandary," he said. "Yuh savvy? I owe you my life, but—" He broke off.

FROM over a hill to the north appeared twelve horsemen, armed to the teeth, dusty, worn, bewhiskered, grim-eyed and purposeful. They halted, staring at the scene of battle, where tied men lay on the ground and some saddle horses stood near at hand, while others had halted not far away.

Bill found his hat, picked it up and beckoned with it.

"Come on," he called.

The posse rode up warily, apparently suspecting a trap of some kind.

"The gents you boys are lookin' for?" Bill inquired, pointing to the tied bandits.

A lanky blond man with reddish whiskers nodded emphatically.

"Torpedo Adams and his six men," he said. "We had descriptions of 'em all. I'm Sheriff Untenmeir of Center City. You're—" He looked at the gory cowpuncher.

"That's Bill Grabow," spoke up Torpedo Adams. "The fightin'est *hombre* east of the Sierras. So we meet again, Untenmeir, but it wasn't you rounded up my pack of coyotes —yes, *coyotes,*" bitterly. "'Twas Bill."

"He seems to ha' rounded you up, too, Torpedo," returned Sheriff Untenmeir. "We're obliged to you, Bill, and we'll be hittin the back trail."

"All right with me," said Bill. "I got to go on north to get a stud horse and take him to my outfit. Torp, I took back the three hundred dollars my boss gave me to pay for the horse. But first, Sheriff, there's five cowboys tied up over yonder a piece. I want to take that yellow-skinned coyote," pointing to Cass, "to them boys. He killed their boss in cold blood this mornin'. You wouldn't mind lettin' them C Slash C boys hang him?"

"Nothin' doin' on the hangin'!" snapped Untenmeir. "Explain further, and tell how-come you cleaned up on this bandit gang—alone."

Following his explanation, Bill asked for Torpedo's belt and gun as a souvenir, which the sheriff gave him. Later he and Untenmeir took Cass, the C Slash C ponies and the money that the outlaws had taken from the cowboys, and went to the spot where those punchers had been left tied. To Bill's relief, Cass told them defiantly, proudly. "*I* drilled Clem Goodnight!"

"And Jurg Donaldson never hired you to do it?" demanded Lance Hoag, the C Slash C foreman.

"I kilt him on my own hook," snarled Cass. "Kilt him 'cause he's the geezer what sent me to the big rock house. I 'scaped a year ago. It'll be a rope for me this time." He glared venomously at Bill and added, "If it hadn't been for *yuh* hornin' in on this deal I'd ha' been free an' boss of a bunch of outlaws. One satisfaction, Torpedo Adams'll swing right with me."

Bill said nothing while the C Slash C cowboys said many things. They felt little and mean about their mistake. They hoped Bill would excuse 'em. "Aw, forget it," returned Bill. "But, Lance, I wish you'd ride along with me to Jurg Donaldson's ranch an' put a stop to this fool range war idea you outfits has got."

LANCE rode with Bill, north by east, to Donaldson's ranch. The other cowboys went home to the C Slash C ranch. The big posse, led by Sheriff Untenmeir, headed due north with their prisoners, Torpedo Adams and all of his men.

Before they struck out, Bill saw Torpedo's eyes on him, questioning, reproachful. Bill felt queer about this. He owed Torpedo a debt which,

the way the play had come up, he hadn't been able to pay. He was silent as he rode beside Lance Hoag.

IT was nearly sundown when they arrived at Jurg Donaldson's ranch on Redstone River, on which some twelve miles lower down was the C Slash C.

To Donaldson, an oldish, white-haired man, Bill announced, "I came to get a Percheron stallion from you for my boss on the J J."

"Good," returned the rancher. "I met Tom Bethcher in Omaha and sold him that hoss. Light off, J J man. But I dunno as I'm askin' *you* to light off, Lance."

"Feelin' proddy toward Goodnight and his cowboys?" Bill asked.

"Proddy? You bet."

"What was the row about?"

"A dogie calf. He claimed it was his'n. I claimed it was mine. 'Twas, too. One word led to another. Me an' Clem went at it hammer an' tongs. He licked me. Rather, he downed me an' wouldn't let me up."

"An' you said several fool things?" remarked Bill, his eyes twinkling. "Things like—you'd get Clem?"

"Mebbe I did. Say, what you know 'bout this?"

"Enough. Your fool war's off. A killer got Clem this mornin'."

"Got Clem?"

"Four bullets. The C Slash C boys was sure you was 'sponsible. I had the luck to show 'em different. Where you goin', Jurg?"

"Goin' to the C Slash C. Goin' to see if there's anything I can do for Clem's family. My gosh, poor Clem! Best friend I ever had. I'm all broke up." Donaldson's voice quavered. "To think he got shot when him an' me was at outs. At outs over a pesky dogie calf not worth seven dollars! I was a fool. Say, Lance, did you get the killer?"

"Bill got him. Big posse's takin' the cur north, along with a lot more bandits. They'll be campin' tonight in the hills somewhere west of here," said Lance. "I'll ride with you to the C Slash C, Jurg. I'm just as sorry as you are, but I'm glad this fool squabble is over. So long, Bill."

"Be seein' both of you again," said Bill. He stabled his horse. The ranch was deserted now that Jurg and Lance were gone. Bill felt low in his mind. He rummaged in the bunkhouse and was lucky enough to find a shirt that would fit his mighty chest. He went to the main house and was getting supper when three cowboys rode in. Bill paid one of them for the shirt and ate with them, saying nothing about the outlaws.

DARKNESS came. Bill washed the dishes, and packed up a small supply of grub, matches and tobacco, unnoticed. He appropriated a blanket and rolled the supplies in it. Jurg Donaldson came home, looking old, tired, crushed. "Poor Clem gone. It's jus' hell. You can sleep in that room openin' off the livin' room, Bill."

Bill went into the room and shut the door, but he did not go to bed. Two hours later he eased himself out through the window, rode west through the starlit night until he located a camp near which twenty horses were picketed and hobbled.

At the camp itself, on a hill among pines, a bright fire glowed, late though it was. Beds were scattered about. Men snored, except one with a Winchester across his shoulder, who either marched back and forth or circled the camp.

Seated on the ground, their backs to trees to which they were roped, were seven men. Most of these, their heads lopped over, were sleeping in spite of their uncomfortable positions. But one of the seven was wide awake, staring into the fire.

The lone sentry walked back and forth in the firelight, looking at the prisoners. He decided to take another

circle, passed out of the firelight and walked by a big pine. Something swished with a dull thud against the back of his head. He dropped without uttering a sound.

"The butt-end of a shot-loaded quirt's just as good as a blackjack," thought Bill.

SLIPPING up behind one tree, the cowboy's pocket-knife severed several ropes.

"This way, Torp," he whispered.

Torpedo Adams slowly slid sideways from the tree. He rose to his feet and followed Bill, who had picked up a saddle not in use as a pillow. Together they went down the hill, across the valley, to where two horses were tied—Bill's and Torpedo's. Bill saddled Torpedo's horse and tied his blanket-wrapped bundle behind the saddle.

"Here's your belt and gun, Torp," he said, unbuckling the belt which Sheriff Untenmeir had given him.

Torpedo Adams buckled on the belt, remarking, "Now I feel dressed ag'in. Bill, I was scairt you'd forgot me."

"Uh-unn. I hadn't," Bill scratched his nose thoughtfully. "But, Torp, I been in a kinda sweat."

"You always rid a straight trail," said Torpedo, "and you figgered you really ortent turn loose a bandit like me."

"Nope, Torp, that wasn't what was, an' still is, botherin' me. I never even questioned what I orter do 'bout you, personal. But them men of yourn—I wondered if I owed 'em anything. If you'd be willin' to ride without 'em?"

"You owe them coyotes nothin'," snapped Torpedo. "Why, they'd ha' been tickled to see you swing. All of 'em wanted me to ride on and let you take the atmosphere jig."

"I'm relieved to hear that, Torp. 'Course you know they all turned ag'in yuh?"

"Right, I know it. No question in my mind about what to do. I won't lift a hand to help 'em."

"It's all jake, then. I felt queer 'bout mentionin' it to you, Torp, but I figgered all along that a wolf hadn't orter trail with a coyote pack."

"Coyote pack's right!" said Torpedo bitterly. "Can't always pick the men you'd like to run with in this game, Bill. I'll play a lone hand from now on—'less you'll throw in with me?"

"Nope," said Bill. "I can't see it that way. Care to throw in with me, Torp?" a bit wistfully.

"I told you you'd do to tie to," said the outlaw, "but cowboyin' is jus' too dull. Ain't no thrill and danger."

"YE-AH, 'tis dull, Torp. Nothin' excitin' ever happens to me. Say, Torp, follow down Redstone River sixty miles to the J. J. ranch. In the pasture is a steel-gray hoss, a dead ringer for this 'un I'm ridin'. He's mine, and he's gentle and tough. If that hoss should be missin' when I get home with the stallion I was sent to get, I won't raise no fuss. You know you need a darn good horse. Torp."

"Thanks, Bill. You may need a good alibi for tonight."

"Jurg Donaldson'll furnish that," Bill grinned.

"You more'n squared anything you feel you might ha' owed me, Bill."

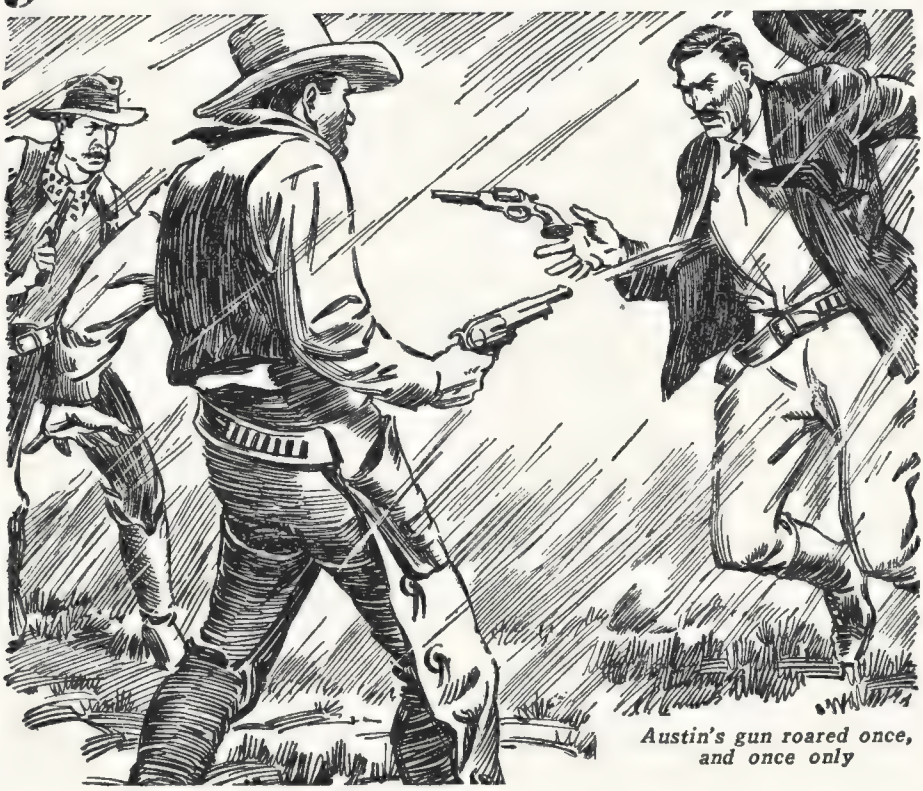
"Glad to hear you say so. Seems like we'll never say good-by. Oh, hell—Torp. Wish yuh'd ride with me—not now, but later."

"No, cowboy, I can't do it. *Adios,* Bill Grabow."

"So long, Torp."

Their hands met, remained locked in a long grip. Two strong men standing under the western stars in a land that was big and wide and open, a land they both loved. Strong men that rode trails apart.

The Gun-Slinger *from* Sundown



Austin's gun roared once, and once only

Follow a Fast-Shooting Waddy of the Cowtowns as He Swaps Lead with a Rustler Outfit in this Smashing, Hell-for-Leather Yarn of the Mesas!

A Thrill-Packed Complete Novelette

By JACKSON COLE

Author of "Gun Law," "Vanishing Beef," etc.

EVEN in a high-crowned Stetson, "Sundown" Austin didn't look tall; and riding the diminutive Midnight pony whose legs were short but brave, the waddy wouldn't have attracted any attention at all. Unless you glanced at his eyes, that seemed to look straight

through you. They'd make you uncomfortable if you had anything to hide.

But, small as the pair was—the waddy and his little black Midnight hoss—they had a reputation back around Sundown, where Austin had gathered up his nickname. Gunsmoke seemed to hover over the scene wherever they went.

And here it was again!

AUSTIN rode the trail into a scrub oak thicket a hundred miles from the country where he got his name—and square into a battle.

Somewhere ahead of him on the trail, pistols barked out suddenly and viciously. The summer afternoon quivered with the echo. And Sundown twisted up his nose to the scent of gunpowder and rode toward it.

When he figured that the battle was no more than a hundred yards ahead of him he slid off his saddle, wrapped the reins around the horn and crept forward. Midnight trailed him.

It was almost dark in the shade of the trees, but straight ahead of him Sundown made out a small shack in a little clearing. The shack was old and weather-stained—and Sundown remembered it well.

The door was hanging open. And rifle fire—slow and sporadic—came from within.

Then Sundown made out the figure of a man hiding in the protection of a tree while he poured a stream of bullets into the shack. And further around in the woods, where Sundown couldn't get a look at him, another man kept up a cross-fire at the place. Between them, they had the defender of the shack at their mercy, and they were showing him none of that.

"Dirty two-timing cowards," Sundown gritted.

He slid his well-oiled gun from the holster on his right leg and crept forward. By skipping from tree to tree, he came within a dozen paces of the first man without being observed.

And from here he could see the man easily. He recognized him. And when he did, the corners of his mouth went down to form a hard line. He covered the man with his gun. Then he spoke one word.

"Well?"

The word was soft—like the fur on the claw of a mountain lion—and it contained the same menace.

The man before him whirled in surprise. His face suddenly froze into immobility; then his lips loosened and his jaw dropped. His body began to sag and his eyes widened like one who suddenly looks upon death, and is afraid.

"Sundown!"

Sundown Austin's eyes glittered in an icy smile. His lips grinned—but he was not laughing.

"Yes, Beaver. It's Sundown—Stop it!"

The man broke off what he had thought was an unseen swing of his gun.

"Easy with that iron, Beaver. Let it quiver again and I'll punctuate you for keeps." Sundown took a step nearer the man. "Didn't expect me so soon, eh?"

BEAVER stood like a ragged rooster hypnotized by a snake. He couldn't make an answer.

"Didn't you know that when you shot Denby in the back I'd get you sooner or later? Did you think you could kill a friend o' mine and get away with it, Beaver?"

Still Beaver didn't answer. Instead, he dropped his gun on the ground.

"Pick it up!" Sundown ordered.

"I ain't gonna shoot it out with you," the man whimpered. "You'd kill me dead. You're a professional

gunman. Why it would be murder!"

"It was murder when you killed Denby. Pick up that gun!"

"I ain't gonna pick it up—just to be shot."

A series of rapid shots came from the other side of the cabin. Wood splintered from the sill of the open door.

Sundown Austin lost no more time springing into action.

"I can't waste time with you now," he snapped at the man before him. And with that he took a couple of steps forward and knocked the man unconscious with the barrel of his gun.

Then he darted through the woods toward the hidden man on the other side of the cabin. He got a glimpse of a white Stetson and sent a bullet that knocked it flying. He heard a shout from its wearer, then the sound of scuffling feet, followed by the clatter of a running horse. The man had got away.

But not without losing one of his guns which he didn't take time to retrieve. Following his quarry, Austin found the weapon and thrust it inside his shirt. Then he went into the shack. The old man who had been defending it was dead.

When Sundown came outside again, it was to find that Beaver had made a quick rally and had vanished from the scene.

SUNDOWN AUSTIN rode on to his destination. The shack where the battle had taken place was on the Bob Denby ranch, and it was toward the Denby ranch house that Austin turned Midnight's steps. He rode up to the house late in the evening.

The Denby ranch was a big and valuable spread, and the ranch house was a large, cool, low-lying structure surrounded by well-kept out buildings and corrals. Sundown Austin left his animal at the hitch rail and was invited into the house by a man with a star on his vest. The sheriff conducted him to a cool bedroom.

Lying propped up in bed, with his chest bandaged heavily, was a boy of not more than seventeen or eighteen. It was easily seen that he was in a bad way. There was another man in the room beside the sheriff.

SUNDOWN AUSTIN introduced himself. And when he pronounced his name he saw that both the sheriff and the third man in the room recognized it. It seemed to freeze them up, and the cordiality died out of their voices.

The youth on the bed said, "I reckon we've all heard of you." There was neither cordiality nor coldness in his voice—simply reserve. But not so the sheriff.

"And what we've heered ain't been too invitin' neither," the officer snapped. He was a dried up man, tall and lean, and featuring a mustache that hung over his mouth. He hitched up the holster and belt around his waist and asked: "What you want around these parts?"

There seemed to be laughter concealed behind Sundown's eyes. "Haven't decided exactly—yet." he answered easily. "Why?"

The sheriff frowned. "I might as well say right now that this part o' the country's already got too many o' the likes o' you. We don't need no more gun-slingers around here."

The air in the room became uncomfortable, but Austin seemed not to notice it.

Young Denby, lying in bed, seemed annoyed that the officer should start trouble under his roof. The third man, seeing this, spoke up.

"What the sheriff meant," he said, "was that there's been so much lawlessness around here recently that we who live here are naturally suspicious of everybody. Only a few hours ago there was a shootin' ruckus. Not more than a week ago,

Denby's father and himself were shot. His father is dead and he himself is seriously wounded."

Denby seized this chance to try to change the subject. "This is Bert Estes," he said, introducing the man who had just spoken.

Austin said "Howdy," and examined the man. He was in his forties, and had discarded regulation range garb for breeches and laced boots. The man's face was that of a person who had to dominate all those around him. Sundown Austin didn't like him.

THE sheriff was not to be kept from finishing his say. "You ain't said what you was doin' around here, yet," he growled.

Austin looked at him squarely. "I came to talk private business with young Denby, here."

"Well, talk it."

"I said *private*."

"We don't want to hear no gunman's business," the sheriff insisted. "You better get goin', or I'll lock you up for bein' of suspicious character."

Estes interjected a conciliatory statement. "I'm afraid Riggs is right. I'd suggest you ride on out. Come back some time when we haven't so much trouble on our hands."

Sundown Austin looked around and saw no mood on the part of any of them to listen to what he had to say.

"I came here to talk to Denby, private," he said slowly. "But seein' he's not private I'll let it wait till later. In the meantime, I'll talk to you private, Estes. Come out on the porch, will you?"

Estes followed him outdoors where they would not be within earshot of the others.

When they were some distance from the bedroom, Sundown Austin took a gun out of his shirt front and handed it to Estes. A frown flashed across the man's face and quickly fled.

"I just wanted to return this to you," Austin said easily. "You must 'a' dropped it somewhere. I see it's the mate to the one you're wearin'."

Estes went rigid for a fraction of a minute, then quickly caught himself and relaxed.

"Thanks," he said, taking the weapon. "Where'd you find it?"

"Between here'n the pass. Just happened to see it on the trail as I was ridin' here. Been lost long?"

"About a week," Estes returned suavely. "Glad to get it back." There was a strained quality in his voice as he offered his thanks.

"Not at all, don't mention it," Austin answered with that cold smile "Sure, you can return the favor. I was thinkin' o' droppin' in and talkin' to you tomorrow—provided you could persuade the sheriff to let me stay." As he spoke he looked squarely at Estes and the latter began to feel uncomfortable. Then he remembered the reputation of Sundown Austin, and said:

"Why, sure, drop in. I think Riggs will let you stay. I'll talk to him about it."

"I'll be much obliged," Austin said. And he was still wearing that cold smile when a few minutes later Estes and Riggs rode away, leaving him with the wounded young Denby.

CHAPTER II

Bluff

SUNDOWN AUSTIN pulled a chair up to the side of young Denby's bed and sat down. The youth had not indicated one way or another what he thought of his visitor.

Austin rolled a cigarette, then said, "Here's my cards as much as I can expose 'em at the present time. Your

brother was a friend o' mine down in Sundown. He got a letter from yore dad askin' him to come home an' help him in this trouble you're havin'. Jim was fixin' to come when somebody plugged him in the back. Somebody must 'a' known he was gettin' ready to take a hand. Anyway, I decided to take his hand in this game.

"I was comin' to see you about it when I happened to ride into the little fracas this afternoon. Yore foreman was shot an' I buried him. Now what I want is to take his place for the time bein'. I'll have to be away for a while, but I want the job. I hope I can explain things satisfactory to you later."

THE youth thought a while, then made up his mind.

"Estes and Riggs think you're bad medicine," he said thoughtfully. "But I've heard you and Jim was friends. I'll take a chance on you."

Sundown smiled encouragingly. "*Bueno,*" he said. "And you forget all about the trouble. I'm on the job from now on, and the first thing I'm goin' to do is go and talk to your men. How many of them are you sure are loyal to you?"

"There's no tellin'," the youth answered wearily. "Whoever is tryin' to drive us off our place must have plenty of his men planted with us."

"I'll find out who they are right now," Sundown said, getting up. "Take it easy, *hombre,* and I'll see you in a few days."

Sundown went out to the bunk house. Outside the building he heard the tin dishes rattling and a buzz of talk and he knew that the men were just about through with their supper. He walked into the door and stood at the head of the table.

Twenty men looked at him and he stood a moment while they looked. Then he spoke to them.

"Men, yore foreman was killed by some dirty coyotes today. Drygulched; didn't have a chance. I'm the new foreman, an' I'll be givin' the orders from now on."

Austin, on his stumpy legs, knew that he was not impressive to look at. He waited until the men had time to think of what he had said. He looked at the lines of faces on each side of the table, and he saw different reactions. Fully half of the men were plainly hostile; some tried not to hide sneers; others didn't reveal their thoughts.

"Them that don't want to do the jumpin' when I do the yappin' can pack up their warbags and get their time tonight," Austin continued. "I will say, though, that this outfit is in a tight hole and needs all the men that want to stick—so long as they're loyal. And them that stays can call me Sundown. I'm Sundown Austin."

And again the name Sundown Austin meant something. It was evident there was not a man under the roof who hadn't heard of his reputation. On some of the faces there was a new respect—on others curiosity to see the man whose name as a gun-slinger had spread all over the country.

ONE man left the table and walked over to Sundown. The fellow was every bit as short as Austin. His legs were bowed from years in the saddle, and his hair was a flaming red. His face was freckled and his eyes green.

He had a face that one would expect to see always smiling. But he wasn't smiling now.

"I guess you can give me my time and I'll be ridin'," he said.

Sundown looked at him steadily. There was honesty and fearlessness all over the man. Sundown was well pleased at his reactions.

"All right," Sundown said. "Come on up to the house."

The man took his hat and started out with Sundown, while the bunk

house became a hum of voices behind them.

Out of earshot of the bunk house Sundown stopped and said, "Red, I'd like you to reconsider about this quitting. I know you're not the kind of a person that would want to work with a notorious gun-slinger. That's the reason I want you to stay on. The kid's got to have someone here that we can trust."

The red-headed one didn't answer. Sundown continued:

"One of the reasons I'm here is to get the man that's responsible for the killin' of the kid's father and brother. The brother was my buddy, and no matter what you think o' me, you don't have to worry about me. I'm here to get the ringleader o' the bunch that's makin' trouble, an' you'd be doing the Denbys a favor if you'd stay."

The red-headed puncher rolled a cigarette while he thought over the proposition. Then he said slowly:

"I know your rep—and it ain't much good. But I reckon I'll stay. The kid needs somebody around, an' I'm cautionin' you right now—even if you do happen to be Sundown Austin—that you'd better not start no trouble. The kid's got enough of it like things is."

"That's enough for me," Sundown said "And from now on you're in charge. I'm ridin' out on business in the morning, and if I need you I'll let you know. I'll depend on your judgment when I tell you what I want you to do. If you don't like the situation, you can turn me down."

A LITTLE after sunup Austin rode down the trail to the Bert Estes' ranch. He saw half a dozen hard-bitten men hanging around the bunk house in the back, and he saw a stir among them when he rode up. His reputation and the knowledge that he was in the country had preceded him. Sundown's grin was ironical.

A moment later he was facing Estes in his office. The boss, seated at his desk, greeted him with a cold smile.

"I was expecting you," he said.

"I thought you would be," Austin commented. He found himself a chair when Estes didn't invite him to sit, dropped into it and cocked his feet up on Estes' desk in a familiar and irritating manner.

Estes acted constrained but silky. He didn't know how much Sundown knew about the gun he had found, and he was determined to find out. He tried to convey the impression that he expected the two to become confidential; he acted in a way to encourage confidence without himself saying anything.

AUSTIN had deliberately assumed an air of reckless carelessness. He knew he was in a tight spot and it was up to him not to betray his hand. He casually broke out papers and tobacco and rolled a cigarette, then lighted it, without once glancing at Estes. He was giving the man time to grow impatient. It got on Estes' nerves. There was a trace of a fleeting glitter in the rancher's eye. He brought the matter to a point.

"Well, what's the visit about?" he snapped. "The gun, I suppose. You want a reward for finding it?"

"In a way," Sundown answered calmly. "It ought to be worth a pretty big reward."

"I don't get your meaning."

"Considering where I found it."

"Where did you find it? You said—"

"I know what I said—that was at the Denby place where I was talking. Now I'll tell you. I found it right where you dropped it after you killed Denby's foreman!"

Estes stiffened in his chair.

"You're making a mighty serious charge!"

"An' I got the evidence to back

it up. I saw you there—saw you kill him!"

Estes passed his hand over his face, trying to conceal the cold rage in his eyes.

"You didn't mention that when you were there and gave me back the gun in the presence of the sheriff and young Denby. Why didn't you turn me in—if you thought you could make such a ridiculous charge stick?"

"I had different ideas then," Sundown said calmly. "Sorta figured then I'd play a lone hand in this game. But I changed my mind after I saw the set-up."

"DON'T talk in riddles," Estes snapped. "What are you trying to get at?"

"Just this. I've decided to throw in with your gang—lock, stock and barrel. You're systematically cleaning out the Denby spread with the idea o' gettin' the place for yourself. It's the best layout in the country and I don't blame you for wanting to get your hands on it. I wouldn't have any use for the land—but there's plenty o' stock left, even with the inroads you've made on it.

"I came here to go it on my own—but the situation's made me decide it will be better for me to throw in with you. I ain't gonna hog it all. So count me in."

Much depended on the result of this talk with Estes, and Sundown made his statements as though he were discussing an ordinary partnership which had been offered him.

Estes heard him out and was silent for a moment. And during that silence the gaze of the two men met. Estes seemed to realize that he could not bluff nor fool Austin. He was convinced that Austin knew part of what was going on in the valley and that Austin had come to cut in on the profits to be made.

He had heard of this gunman, heard that he was an outlaw and could handle his Colt faster than any man in the state. He recalled now that Austin had not told young Denby anything of what he knew. He saw cool courage and daring in the face of Austin. And he saw the way to get rid of him was not through the ordinary channels—but to get him involved in the crooked business—and bide his time. There were men in Estes' employ who could take care of Sundown without danger to themselves. Estes appeared to be thinking about Austin's proposition.

"What's your proposition on this partnership?" he finally asked.

Everything split two ways, equal, after the boys are fixed up with their cut." Austin never batted an eye as he spoke. "I'm now the foreman of the Denby spread—put there by the boy himself. So I'm all set to handle the Denby end of the situation."

Estes flared up.

"Half interest?" he demanded. "I suppose you'd like me to move out and give you full charge!" He pounded his desk with his fist. "Get this, Austin," he snarled. "I'm running this show and if you want to come in on it you come in on *my* terms, not *yours*."

"Suit yourself," Austin returned. "I've been lookin' out for myself for a long time—and I can keep doing it. And remember—I'm on the inside at Denby's."

Failing to put over his bluff, Estes subsided somewhat.

"You're asking too big a split," he rumbled. "I was here first, and I'm going to run things my way."

SUNDOWN got up from his chair. "That's your business," he said. I'll go on with mine the way I planned." Estes tried one more tack.

"My boys are out at the bunk house now. Suppose I tell 'em it's open season on you?"

Austin's grin was contemptuous.

"Call in your mad dogs. If there's

any of 'em that's foolish enough to try anything, I'll take 'em on."

Estes made no move to call any of the men.

There was fire in Austin's eye when he continued. "I gave you your chance and you turned it down. I'm leavin' you with the word that you'd better lay off. And just to make sure you don't pull anything, I'm taking you with me until I get out o' gunshot o' your men. Get up and let me frisk you."

Estes understood the threat. His manner changed, but there was the light of deceit in his eye which didn't go unnoticed by Austin.

"You win, Austin," Estes said. "We'll split it two ways. Come on out and meet the boys."

The cold smile did not leave Sundown's face. "Okay," he said, "and tell 'em I'm takin' charge of the works—under your orders, of course."

CHAPTER III

At Coyote Pass

AUSTIN had dinner with the group of men at the Estes ranch. Estes had introduced him as the new assistant foreman, and they accepted him. By the time dinner was over he had won their confidence, although it pained him to have to be cordial to such a motley group of the dregs of the cow country.

After he had eaten he said to the man next to him at the table, "The boss wanted me to ride out to the camp. What's the best trail?"

"Take the north fence line about five miles to where it abuts the foot of the mountains. There's a trail to the left there that'll lead you right to the camp. It's hid in a box canyon about three miles back in the hills. 'Tain't easy to find but you'll know it by three tall granite needles stickin' up about twenty feet high. Ride just to the left o' them an' you'll be there."

Sundown thanked the man, rolled a cigarette and smoked it. Then, with a feeling of exultation he managed to conceal, he saddled his animal and rode off down the trail.

JOGGING along on Midnight, he reeled off the slow miles. The sun beat down upon him and he gave it no attention. He was alert, for he knew that Estes had only accepted his proposition in order to stall for time. Sundown expected a bullet at the first opportunity they would have for drygulching him. Estes was not the kind of man to admit, even tacitly, that he was up to any deviltry; he would shoot in the back.

Sundown came at last to the three granite needles that marked the hidden trail, and slowly he made his way beside them. Then in a few minutes he rode without being challenged into a clearing, in the center of which was a pine-log cabin. He was in a flat bottomed box canyon, completely hidden in the mountains. A perfect hideout which could be easily defended at its only bottle-neck entrance.

He approached the cabin alertly —and was greeted by silence.

The cabin was empty although there were signs that it was being used regularly. Remains of dinner were still on the table in greasy tin plates.

Austin left the cabin and rode about the canyon. Then he saw what he was looking for.

Tall hills surrounded the canyon, barren rocks that formed a natural barrier around three sides of it. And in one of the walls was a knife-like cut that led to another and smaller hollow. In this hollow were at least two hundred head of cattle. And they wore the Denby brand.

It was the most cleverly concealed natural hideout that Austin had ever seen. Satisfied, he rode back to the house—just as four men rode up.

They were a reckless looking quartette of range men—and Austin recognized one of them. It was Beaver.

The others were a good match for that ruffian.

Austin rode up to meet them.

ALERTLY they continued forward when they saw him, and then pulled up to a stop, maneuvering their horses out fanwise. The leader was a heavy-set man with a black scraggly mustache and heavy eyebrows beetling over snapping black eyes. They reined up and waited for Austin to approach, each man with his hand resting lightly near his gun.

"Howdy," Austin said, with that cold smile that seldom left him—particularly when he was in a tight place. He was in that place now, and he knew it.

"Howdy," the leader grunted. Then he waited for Austin to speak his piece.

"Estes sent me out here to take charge," Austin said evenly. "Reckon that makes me your new boss."

"Yeah?" The leader of the quartette growled out the question. "Well, I'm Tishomingo, if that means anything to you. And I'm the boss around here."

"You was the boss," Austin corrected, without raising his voice. But he deliberately made it sound as irritating as possible. He did not look at Beaver. "I'm the boss now and you take orders from me. See?"

Tishomingo's face clouded with a sudden rage and he bawled out his reply. "Why, you dirty, upstart little coyote, I'll fill you full o' lead in a second."

Insane rage at Austin's nerve drove him to go for his gun. He brought the weapon out smoking. The movement was so fast that the eye could hardly see it. The valley rang with the echo of a fusillade of shots.

But they weren't all from Tishomingo's gun. They were interspersed with others.

For a miracle had happened. Austin's hand had been empty when Tishomingo grabbed his gun—but there was a blur at his side and Austin's gun spoke a fraction of a second before the other, so quick had been his draw.

Tishomingo's finger had constricted the trigger of his weapon more than once, but it was a dead hand that did it. The bullets flew without aim, after his first one had laid open a crease in Austin's shoulder.

Tishomingo jerked in his saddle. His gun arm went down slowly as though it carried too heavy a weight. Then, with a slow motion, the man's bulky body reeled in the saddle, slid to one side and fell to the dust with a loud thump. Tishomingo was dead, a victim of his mistaken idea that he was the fastest gunman about.

AUSTIN'S weapon was sweeping from one to the other of the surprised men who sat mounted before him. But they had seen an example of shooting that they would long remember, and in their astonishment and fear they were paralyzed. No one of them cared to match his gun against this streak of greased lightning who had come among them.

Austin waited until he saw that they didn't intend to take up the quarrel at this time, at least, then pouched his weapon. And that inscrutable cold smile returned to his face.

"As I was sayin', I came out here to take charge. I'm givin' the or-

ders from now on. Any o' the rest o' you got any objections?" Austin looked from one to the other, without showing Beaver any more recognition than he showed the others.

There were no objections.

Beaver had about him the look of a guilty dog that expects punishment. Austin smiled inwardly at the man's fright, but did not bother to say anything to the man. He had a definite reason for this. He knew that Beaver was a coward at heart, and he wanted to keep the man in fear of his life for a while, because he had other uses for Beaver. He had an idea that Beaver would finally break under the strain of the suspense.

Austin gave his orders. "We're gonna get rid o' that Denby stock today," he said. "I got all arrangements made, an' they're pretty fancy, too." His grin was supposed to invite approval. "I been made foreman o' the Denby ranch—an' we're all set tc clean it out proper. The boys there are gettin' the rest o' the Denby stuff rounded up.

"So, we take this stuff out an' drive it by Denby's an' throw it all together and push it through the Pass. Estes is takin' care o' the Denby kid, so by this time tomorrow we ought to have the whole show finished. An' then you boys get what's comin' to you." He added, as an afterthought, "An' I hope you enjoy it as much as I will."

"We ain't et, yet," Beaver complained.

"ALL right. Go to the house and get somethin' to eat an' then we'll get the stuff started. But *pronto*. It's beginnin' to look like we're gonna have a thunder shower an' I want to get the stuff through the Pass before it breaks."

Sundown had been watching the gray haze that was coming up on the horizon and he hoped he could get the cattle out into the open before the storm broke. When the men went to get their food, he watered his animal.

A few minutes later he followed them in. Two of the men were eating.

Beaver wasn't with them.

CHAPTER IV

Storm Center

THE face of the gunslinger went grim. The men at the table looked guilty and afraid. It was plain that Beaver had told them of Sundown's reputation as a gunman—if they needed more than what they had seen when Tishomingo got rash.

"Where's Beaver?"

"He musta just stepped out," one of the men said uneasily.

Don't lie to me," Austin barked menacingly. "Where'd he go?"

"It warn't our doin'," the man explained eagerly. "Beaver said he had to go somewhere and see a man an' he rid away. We told him you'd be sore, but he went anyway."

Sundown swore under his breath. He hadn't wanted Beaver to escape him. And there was no telling what the man was up to. But it was certain that Sundown had his work cut out to be done in a hurry now.

"Let's get goin'," he ordered sharply. "We got plenty to do."

The men mounted and they all rode to the concealed pen where the cattle were.

"Get 'em out," Sundown ordered. "We got to drive 'em straight through Denby's range."

One of the men looked at him suspiciously.

"Don't worry about that," Austin added. "Everything's set at Denby's. There ain't no danger."

It was a long and hot job, driving

the cattle out of the natural corral. The animals were thirsty and nervous. A cloud of dust was boiled up under the tramping hoofs and settled in the men's nostrils and on their sweaty faces. They tied their bandanas around their noses, but still the powdery dust made breathing hard. The cattle bellowed and fought each other and tried to break out of the herd.

BUT finally they passed the three needles down the narrow trail and started, in a thin and restless line, toward the Denby range. Austin was alert, everywhere at once. First he rode up to the point, then back down the line to the drag. It was a large herd for three men to try to handle under the best of conditions, and now with the storm coming and the animals restless, conditions were at their worst.

Nor was that all that Austin had to worry about. Would the two men bolt and leave him alone with the herd? He knew that he could not depend on them—that it was fear alone that kept them at their jobs.

It was a slow drive. But after weary hours the line of stock crawled over a rise and were on the Denby land—and in sight of keen eyes from the Denby ranch house. It was the move that Austin had counted on—and so far it was going well.

Except for three things that seemed to break all at once.

Off to the left he saw a group of four horsemen coming toward him. And from the direction of the Denby corrals, he saw a larger bunch.

And overhead, the clouds of the afternoon thunderstorm were boiling faster and more furiously. The thunder was beginning to roll with a louder rumbling, and on the horizon wicked flashes of lightning were shooting their jagged shafts to the ground, and approaching at a rapid rate.

But there was one break. Even if the cattle stampeded, they were back on Denby land.

The four horsemen from the left were now within a quarter of a mile. And Austin could recognize three of the figures. Estes and the sheriff rode before. Beaver and another man rode after them. Their horses were coming at a lope.

So that was what Beaver had been doing! He had ridden to Estes and reported what was taking place at the hideout.

As the four approached they spread out, guiding their horses about fifty paces apart, then came on abreast. Now they were so close that Sundown Austin stopped his horse and waited for them.

The sheriff approached to within fifty feet and drew rein. He shouted at Austin.

"I arrest you for murder and for stealing this herd o' cattle you're drivin'."

Austin sat easily in his saddle. "Then come and get me," he said.

"I'm givin' you a chance to surrender first," the sheriff shouted back at him. "All these men is deputized to help me, so if you don't come peaceable, we'll have to take you by force."

AUSTIN'S eyes drifted over to where the bunch of punchers from Denby's corrals were loping up to see what was going on. The troup pounded their horses, and even from the distance Austin could see their saddle boots bristling with rifles as well as the guns which they wore. The riders were almost within shooting distance now.

Austin's face went into that familiar cold smile. He had no idea which way the Denby men would turn. With Red leading them, they might side with the sheriff and leave him single handed. He might have convinced Red to side with

him, but the odds were against that. Red had frankly said he didn't like Sundown's reputation.

The sheriff barked again. "For the last time—throw down your gun and ride over here with your hands in the air."

Austin answered. "For the last time—you come to me!"

THE sheriff came—flanked by Estes and Beaver and the other man. And they came a-shooting!

The storm-cast range echoed with pistol shots. At a signal from Estes, the four dug spurs into their horses and triggered their guns.

But they had met a man who didn't count the odds against himself. He had a gun out and smoking even as the attackers got under way.

And this time he didn't shoot so fast. He took slow and deliberate aim—for one gun wouldn't outlast the other four. And it was vital to his life that he make every shot count. There was to be no chance to reload.

His aim was deadly. His first shot brought down the fourth one of the Estes men. His next shot winged Beaver and left him kicking in the dust, not dead, but out of the fight.

In slow deliberation Sundown aimed at Estes. He only succeeded in unhorsing him.

And now the sheriff was on Austin's flank. That officer stood up in his saddle and took deliberate aim.

Then he fired.

But as he did, a surprise greeted him. A new gun beat him to the trigger. And that new gun was Red's. The diminutive puncher had stood up in his own saddle, and had used his Winchester. The sheriff was now afoot, his horse dead.

The shot had saved Austin's life—and had given him a shock of surprise. Red was taking his side—even to shooting the sheriff.

And then of a sudden the range became a smoking battlefield. The two punchers from the hideout added their guns to the roar of the *mêlée*. And overhead the storm clouds poured out their own wrath.

Cattle bawled and trampled each other in a wild stampede. Bullets whined and guns and rifles roared thunderously.

Whatever the miracle which Austin didn't understand, Red and his men were taking sides with him. Otherwise the odds would have been too great for even his lightning gun.

Horses squealed as bullets sent them to the ground mortally wounded. Estes and the sheriff fortified themselves behind fallen animals and pumped lead.

Sundown Austin grinned coldly and worked his way toward them.

He dropped behind a dead horse and reloaded his weapon.

Then he walked squarely toward Estes!

His horse, Midnight, trotted off the battlefield to await his call.

And Estes got up to meet Austin.

The two men, crouching, guns in hand, approached each other.

There was no use for words. Neither of them would go on living while the other was alive. They were born to be enemies to the death.

And now neither offered nor expected any quarter.

NOW they were within twenty paces of each other.

Estes, his eyes blazing his living hatred of this man who had come in and upset his plans, came on tip toes. Austin went forward almost leisurely.

Then Estes jerked his weapon up with a lightning gesture and pulled the trigger.

Austin's gun seemed hardly to move. It roared once and once only. And blood spurted from the forehead of Estes. The man pitched for-

ward and clutched at the ground, dead.

Austin had his face laid open with a bullet crease. He hardly knew it, for his work was not over. He was not safe yet.

The sheriff had taken advantage of Austin's concentration on Estes. Sundown turned just in time to see the man's gun muzzle aimed directly at his back.

Austin's gun barked once. The sheriff, lying beside his wounded animal, seemed to jerk to his feet by some reflex action. He clutched at his breast and then fell over his horse.

THE Denby boys had by this time accounted for the rest of the men. And now Sundown Austin stood alone in the midst of dead cattle and horses, with dead men around him. He stood alone and surveyed his handiwork.

Then Red rode up to him, and leaned on his saddle horn. There was a smile on the puncher's freckled face.

"Well, bad *hombre* from Sundown, now that you got your job finished, mebbe you'll open up and tell a waddy what all the shootin's about. I think I deserve it, for the little help me and the boys was able to give you."

"You deserve it all right," Sundown answered. "But first, tell me how come you decided to throw in with a gunman, as you called me last night."

Red reached into the pocket of his faded shirt and brought out a little gold badge. On it was stamped the name of the State Cattlemen's Association, and the name Sundown Austin.

"You dropped this when you rode off last night," he grinned. "I happened to find it, and today, I figured I wouldn't be goin' far wrong to throw in with you. Right?"

"RIGHT," Sundown grinned. "And I reckon you deserve the rest of the yarn, though it ain't much. Jim Denby was a friend o' mine. When he got word o' the trouble here he was gonna come hotfoot, but this Beaver *hombre*, who must have been sent by Estes, plugged him to keep him from joinin' in the ruckus. Jim had told me he suspected Estes o' havin' the sheriff bought up, so when they got Jim I right quick got the Association to send me on the case.

"I've been workin' for th' Cattlemen's Association under cover for some time. Figured that my establishing a reputation as an outlaw gun-slinger would sure help when it came to tracking down rustlers. It did in this case, all right.

"I was lucky to find evidence enough to incriminate Estes right off, and get him to practically admit he was doin' the dirty work. I just went along on the thing from there. And Beaver's still alive. I've been savin' him to get a confession out of, and I don't think I'll have any trouble doin' that. He's plum scairt o' me.

"That's all. How's the kid?"

"Cussin' a blue streak because he couldn't be out in the middle o' the fightin'."

"Just like ol' Jim," Sundown said. And whistled for his Midnight horse who came a running.

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Horse Sense

Carefully he drew a bead and pressed the trigger

With the Chalk Cliffs Gang Running Wild, Sheriff Pike Bradford Wasn't Getting Over-Popular—And When the Chance to Trap Them Came Along, He Got Busy!

By EARL C. McCAIN

Author of "Wolf's Clothing," "Sundown Orders," etc.

A GRIM smile settled over Sheriff Pike Bradford's strong, rugged old face, when his glasses revealed four dust-shrouded horsemen sweeping across the flats to his right. There was a note of eagerness in his voice as he turned to Lowry Crown, his chief deputy, and Bob Steele and Tom Hobart, who composed his small posse.

"That's the Chalk Cliffs gang, all right. That paint horse in the lead is the same one Jim Driscoll described to me, after they robbed his stage. And we got a chance to head 'em off at Bottleneck Pass if we hurry."

The fact that the posse contained only four men, to oppose an equal number of outlaws, was lost on old Pike as he spurred ahead. The most important thing was that he stood a chance to trap the Chalk Cliffs gang. With an election less than two weeks off he knew his job might depend upon the next few minutes.

ALMOST everyone in Cucharas County knew and respected old Pike. But Crowley Wade, the opposing candidate for sheriff, had been preaching modern methods in law enforcement, because he owned the only automobile in Toncray, the county seat. With the Chalk Cliffs gang running wild, a lot of voters were beginning to wonder if old Pike wasn't maybe a bit behind the times.

The sheriff indulged in a satisfied chuckle as he sent his big roan forward. If he got the outlaws now it would be due to the same treatment he always used—horse-sense.

When the telephone had brought word that the gang had just robbed the office of the Gold King Mine, he hadn't led his quickly-formed posse to the mine but straight toward Bottleneck Pass—the narrow entrance to Chalk Cliffs valley—to try and head them off.

Suddenly the posse reached the end of the line of foothills that screened them, where a wide valley curved back to the base of the mountains. To avoid being seen by the outlaws, they must circle that valley. But Lowry Crown, unaware of this, spurred ahead.

"Come back here, Lowry!" old Pike called hastily. "They'll spot that black of yourn, sure as shootin'."

The deputy reined up quickly and swung back. But the sheriff, with the glasses to his eyes again, saw the damage had been done. The paint horse of the outlaws had leaped forward like a buck.

"Too late now. They've seen us," old Pike growled. "Reckon our only chance is to beat 'em to the pass."

The posse swept out into the valley, their horses on the run. But the outlaws were spurring their mounts. Closer and closer they raced toward the narrow, rocky entrance to the pass, the paint horse gradually drawing away from the other outlaw horses.

"If they had four horses like that paint, no posse could ever catch 'em," old Pike said to Lowry Crown. "We may be able to get within shootin' distance of the others at the pass."

That still seemed possible when the three trailing outlaws forged up to the entrance of the pass. The posse was almost within rifle range. Old Pike had jerked the rifle from his scabbard when, from a cluster of boulders just inside the pass, there came the sharp report of a rifle and a bullet hummed past his head.

"Hold up, everybody!" he ordered, checking his speed. "They're gonna make a stand and we'll have to work up to the pass afoot."

As the four men separated another shot came from the rocks above. Again a bullet screamed past the sheriff's head. He sent back a snap shot, though he had only the smoke puff for a target. Then he and Hobart were among the rocks and working steadily upward.

CROWN and Steele had reached cover on the other side. The sheriff got an occasional glimpse of them moving forward. He was wondering why no more shots came—if the outlaws meant to wipe them out

from ambush—when he saw the three outlaws who had been trailing the paint horse riding leisurely from the upper end of the pass.

Quickly, old Pike turned and called to Hobart:

"Back to the horses, quick! The rider of that paint horse is holdin' the pass alone, while his pardners ride on through."

It was the sheriff's idea to remount and charge the lone man holding the pass. He took the chance of darting across the open space to his roan, with Tom Hobart close behind him. But as they swung to the saddles they saw they were too late.

FROM up the pass, beyond the cluster of boulders, there came a clatter of hoofs. The paint horse burst into view, running as swiftly and gracefully as a deer. His rider, glancing back, swung an arm in derision at the posse.

The sheriff and Hobart tried to make a chase of it for a few minutes. But their horses, while fairly fast, couldn't approach the paint's glorious speed. The pursuers were barely past the cluster of boulders when the paint horse disappeared from view.

Disgusted, old Pike reined up until the others joined him.

"No use goin' on, I reckon," he remarked.

"I'm for tryin'," Lowry Crown replied. "If we don't nab this gang, we're both gonna be out of jobs right after election."

The sheriff's blue eyes rested on the deputy soberly.

"Pshaw, now, Lowry. There's nothing to do but turn back," he answered. "And I got a hunch it may be best if we do. They'll lose no time duckin' from Chalk Cliffs valley. If we don't foller 'em now, they may take it slower the next time and give us a chance to see where they go to."

The beaten posse turned back toward town. Early the next morning, the sheriff and Crown rode out to the Gold King to investigate the robbery. It was afternoon when they returned and tied their tired horses at the hitchrack before the office. The sheriff was a big man, saddle-hardened. Yet there was a tired droop to his shoulders as they strode into the little adobe building.

"Too bad them fellers got away with such a nice haul, Lowry," the sheriff remarked, when Crown had settled his long, tough body into a chair. "Just sorter seems like their horses sprout wings when they reach that Chalk Cliff valley."

Crown started to answer, then clamped his lean jaws shut. He was looking toward the street. In the doorway stood a middle-aged, solidly-built individual, wearing a big white Stetson hat. It was Crowley Wade, with a sarcastic smile on his dark face.

"Howdy, Pike! Hello, Lowry!" he greeted, with some of the good fellowship he had adopted since his nomination. "Understand you didn't have any luck with the Chalk Cliffs gang yesterday."

"NOPE, none whatever," old Pike answered, turning his chair to face the visitor. "They managed to beat us to Bottleneck Pass and I didn't figger there was any use trailin' 'em inside."

"No, I guess not," Wade agreed. "But an automobile might have enabled you to beat them to the pass. I understand this robbery was the third job that gang has pulled in three weeks."

Crown nodded sourly and old Pike answered not at all. It *was* the third job in three weeks. A holdup of Tip Johnson's store at Payson had been the first, followed by the robbery of Driscoll's stage. But there was no occasion for Wade to rub it in.

Suddenly old Pike tensed, then both he and Crown sprang up. From outside, down the street, had come a muffled report.

"What was that? Sounded like a shot to me," the sheriff said.

Wade had turned slightly, so that he now stood in the doorway.

"Don't see anything. Must be some cowboys celebratin'," he began. But old Pike, shoving past him, suddenly exclaimed:

"It's the Chalk Cliffs gang, right in the act of robbin' the bank! I'd know that paint horse anywhere."

THE sheriff, charging out upon the sidewalk, saw four masked men come plunging from the door of the Toncray Bank. They darted toward the hitchrack, where their saddled horses stood waiting.

The sheriff whirled toward the hitchrack, where his big roan stood with drooping head. Lowry Crown, lunging past Wade, ran to the rack so suddenly that both horses pulled back on the reins. Knowing it would take time to loosen those tightened knots, old Pike jerked the Winchester from his saddle-scabbard.

Quickly the sheriff turned into the street, started running toward the bank. Three of the outlaws were already in their saddles, reining out into the dusty street. The fourth, straddling the long-legged paint horse, was just turning to follow them.

Suddenly the sheriff dropped to one knee and cuddled the stock of the rifle to his cheek. Carefully he drew a bead. As the fourth bandit, on the paint horse, whirled to race after his comrades, old Pike pressed the trigger.

Peering across the smoking gun-barrel, the sheriff saw the paint horse suddenly jerk sideways, leap forward a few jumps, then go to his knees. Whirling dust almost hid the other outlaws.

"Come on, Lowry! We got that feller dead to rights!" old Pike called, jumping to his feet.

The deputy was beside the sheriff now, his rifle blazing also. Then old Pike saw his prediction had been wrong.

The rider of the paint horse had slid from his crippled mount. Landing on his feet, he darted into a group of horses in front of the general store. There was a quick movement at the hitchrack, then John Brownlee's fast sorrel bolted into the street with a masked rider swinging into the saddle.

Both the sheriff and the deputy got in several more shots at the rider. But the dust interfered with their aim and a running horse makes a poor target at best. A moment more and the fourth outlaw was out of range, racing after his companions. The sheriff turned on Crowley Wade, who had followed into the street.

"Where's your automobile, Crowley?" he demanded. "We'll give that pet idea of yourn a trial right now."

"It's in the repair shop, with the wheels off," Wade answered, looking crestfallen. "I'm having Hod Furness reline my brakes."

"TOUGH luck," old Pike grunted. "Get the horses, Lowry."

The sheriff, hurrying down the street, stopped beside the crippled paint horse. He saw the bullet had struck high up on the left shoulder, probably not a bad wound.

Then an idea suddenly popped into his mind.

"Get Doc Learmonth," he ordered a bystander. "And tell him to do all he can to save this horse."

Crown, riding up on his black and leading the sheriff's roan, seemed anxious to get going. And a dozen cowboys and ranchmen, including John Brownlee, on a borrowed horse, were waiting to start. But old

Pike, with a new idea in his mind, didn't hurry.

Spying Doc Learmonth, the veterinary, across the street, he walked over to deliver his own message. When it seemed that Crown was on the point of leading the posse out of town without him, the sheriff swung to the saddle of his roan.

A dust-cloud about a mile to the westward marked the trail of the outlaws. But old Pike, reining over beside Crown, said:

"No use tryin' to run them fellers down, Lowry, with my horse and yourn both purty tired. Reckon our best bet it to keep close to 'em until they pass Braden's ranch, then speed up and try to see where they go after they reach Chalk Cliffs valley."

CROWN only grunted in reply. Evidently he felt that quicker action on the sheriff's part in getting started would have given them a better chance to overtake the outlaws. But of course Crown didn't know the sheriff's plan for using the crippled horse.

The sheriff doubted if anyone in the crowd suspected his plan. He had always been tender-hearted about animals, couldn't bear to see any dumb brute mistreated. Undoubtedly the crowd would think he had been interested in the horse for sentimental reasons.

The bandits were still almost a mile in front of the posse when they came to Braden's ranch, which lay in the foothills just below Bottleneck Pass. The outlaws swung out to avoid it, but Sheriff Bradford held a straight course and speeded up as they approached the house.

Leaning toward Crown, Bradford explained.

"Them fellers think they've got a safe lead now, and they'll remember we didn't foller them into the valley yesterday. If we travel fast enough, we may be able to see where they go."

But the terrific ride availed them nothing. When they surged from the pass into the wide, rock-floored valley that was walled in by huge, chalky-white limestone cliffs, with hundreds of caves along their base, their quarry had disappeared.

THE sheriff was leaning from the saddle, quartering back and forth across the valley, when he called to Brownlee.

"Hey, John! Was that sorrel of yourn wearin' shoes?"

"He was shod behind, yes," Brownlee answered. "Why?"

"Because, look here," and old Pike pointed to a section of softer rock that showed a number of tiny nicks, undoubtedly made by horseshoe calks. "I reckon we got a clue at last."

The position of the nicks showed the direction the horse had been traveling. The posse started forward again, the sheriff and Lowry Crown in the lead.

But they had gone but a short distance when the deputy, reining up, remarked:

"Looks like your clue's gonna peter out right here, Sheriff."

He swung down to pick up several horseshoe nails as he added:

"They noticed that sorrel was shod and pulled his shoes."

Old Pike took a moment for deliberation. Then he separated the posse into details of two men each and sent them to search the gulches leading from the valley and the caves along the base of the cliffs. Hank Rogers, a cowboy from up north of Toncray, was paired off with the sheriff. As they rode off, Rogers spoke.

"Kinder funny about that robbery, wasn't it? I mean that crack they made about pullin' it before election."

"What crack?" old Pike asked

sharply. "I didn't take time to inquire much about the robbery before we left."

"The robbers said somethin' to Joe Weaver, the cashier, about robbin' the bank before election because the next sheriff might have an automobile to chase 'em with," Rogers replied.

"They did, eh?" old Pike remarked. "I suppose the outlaws, like everybody else around here have heard Crowley Wade's campaign talk. But I notice his car wasn't handy when we might have used it."

The search proved fruitless, though the sheriff and Rogers were the last to return. Twilight was settling over the valley by this time. Old Pike had given orders to start back to town when Crown motioned him aside.

"I GOT an idea those fellows are hid right close to this valley, Pike," the deputy explained. "And they may have a lookout watching us right now. Suppose I try stayin' in one of those caves, while the rest of you ride on back to town?"

"Kinder a risky thing to try, Lowry. They'd outnumber you four to one, and they might know where you was all the time. If you're plumb anxious to try it, I better stay with you."

"No, that wouldn't do," Crown countered. "The gang knows you by sight, and they'd miss two of us from the posse more than one."

When the sheriff finally agreed to the plan, the posse rode over in front of the cliffs and in and out of several caves. Selecting one that widened inside the entrance and provided plenty of room for his horse, Crown dismounted and remained there.

As the posse, one man shy, made a bluff at continuing the exploration of the caves, the sheriff wondered about the deputy's plan. He was a little uneasy as he rode back to town, but he knew Crown had plenty of courage. Reaching Toncray, he disbanded his posse, stopped at his office to see if he had any calls, then hurried down to the livery stable where the veterinary had his office. "You had him sized up about right, Sheriff," Doc Learmonth said when old Pike had inquired about the paint horse. "That bullet struck a shoulder bone and glanced off. He'll be lame a day or two, but otherwise he's all right."

"How soon can he be ridden, Doc?"

"That depends on how far and how fast. He'll be too sore to carry a man tomorrow. But if we keep him swathed in liniment and the leg rubbed, he might stand a little travel the next day."

"That's soon enough, I reckon," the sheriff answered, and went on back to his office.

When Lowry Crown hadn't returned by noon of the next day, old Pike became genuinely worried. The deputy hadn't set any definite time to return. But the sheriff knew a lot of things might have happened up in that valley, with one officer against four outlaws.

BY nightfall he was hurrying up his own plans. He had Josh Wilson, who owned a livestock truck, haul the crippled paint horse up to Braden's ranch. And he cautioned Wilson to keep his mouth shut about this. His repeated failure to trap the outlaws with posse had convinced old Pike his best bet was to act alone.

By sunup the next morning he was in the saddle and galloping toward the Braden ranch. He had breakfast with the rancher and declined his offer of help. Then, riding the roan and leading the paint horse, he set out for Bottleneck Pass.

Glancing back a little later, he

noticed a moving dust-cloud on the trail to town. Somebody was splitting the breeze toward the Braden ranch. He wondered if Lowry Crown could have ridden into town that morning and was now trying to overtake him, but he didn't have time to wait and see.

THE trail now began to slope upward, so he held the roan to an easy walk to save the paint. Nothing happened as they moved through the rock-bound pass. At its upper end he transferred his saddle and bridle to the paint, left the roan tied in a clump of cedars, and slowly rode into the valley of the chalk cliffs.

The horse limped slightly, but seemed able to bear a rider's weight without danger of injury. Old Pike gave the animal a free rein. At first the paint walked falteringly, as if expecting guidance from the reins. When he discovered he was master of his own course, he turned toward the base of the white cliffs.

Running a wary eye along those frowning cliffs and dark caves at their base, old Pike realized his own danger. Any of those gulches or caves might hold the secret of the outlaws' rendezvous and hard eyes might be peering at him across the sights of rifles. If he only knew what had become of Lowry Crown.

Yet he felt he had been right in playing a lone hand. Posse were cumbersome to handle, and they invariably made too much noise. He was convinced that if he ever solved the mystery of the outlaws' hideout, he must do it alone and by common sense, just as he had solved most of his other problems.

When the paint horse neared the base of the cliffs, old Pike reined into the cave where Crown had waited to watch for the outlaws. But the cave was empty now. And its hard, rocky floor showed no marks to indicate what had happened to the deputy.

Outside again, old Pike clucked to the paint horse. But he kept the reins loose. He was banking on horse sense now, the ability of a dumb beast to find a trail that baffled the eyes of men. But he might face danger once that trail was found.

Right hand resting on the weathered butt of his old Colt, the sheriff peered anxiously into each cavern mouth. Twice his horse faltered, as though expecting guidance from the rider.

But each time he moved on, until he finally turned into one of the larger caves.

The sheriff's pulse quickened as he peered into the dark interior. But he saw nothing suspicious, even after he snapped on his pocket flashlight. All about him the walls of the cavern rose blank, and the smooth, rocky floor showed no trace of a trail.

THE paint horse crossed the main part of the cave and stopped before a tunnel-like arm that extended off to the right. But the beam of the flashlight showed this arm ended in a blank wall just ahead of the animal.

Quietly old Pike slid from the saddle. With his gun in his right hand and the flash in his left, he began to look around. This cave must mean something, else why had the paint horse chosen it from a hundred others? But if so, what did it mean? The flickering ray of the flashlight still told him nothing.

Stepping around in front of the horse, the sheriff smothered an exclamation. His left hand, extended before him, had touched a section of the wall that moved!

Gingerly he again touched the smooth surface of the wall. And

again it moved, bent inward. A prickly sensation ran up and down his spine as he realized the truth. That cave-arm extended onward. The passage was merely blocked by a hanging, weather-stained curtain of canvas that couldn't be distinguished from the rocky wall in the dark cave.

PUSHING the curtain aside gently, he peered into darkness, although a trace of daylight showed farther on ahead. That curtain meant the secret hideout of the Chalk Cliffs gang, explained why they had been able to hide so quickly and completely. But what danger awaited him beyond the end of that tunnel, and what had happened to Lowry Crown?

He had started to move past the curtain when he suddenly froze in his tracks. Something had touched his shoulder from behind. Whipping about, gun drawn, he saw that the paint horse had pushed his head past the curtain, evidently intending to follow him.

"Nope, old fellow, you stay back," the sheriff whispered. Then he stepped back and led the horse to the far side of the cave, where he dropped the reins over the animal's head. He knew that paint, being a native, would stand to those dropped reins all day.

With the danger of the horse betraying him taken care of, he reentered the tunnel and moved through it. Reaching the far end, he almost whistled in surprise. Before him lay a long, narrow slit between the towering cliffs. Its floor was covered with grass, underbrush and boulders that had fallen from the heights above. It was watered by a small stream that had its source in some spring. He realized no man could suspect the hidden valley's existence from outside the cavern entrance.

Suddenly he tensed, as a low sound reached his ears. It was the drone of voices, coming from the left and below him. Cautiously he moved forward, to trace down that sound.

Around a sharp bend in the canyon wall four men were gathered about a small fire, awaiting breakfast, which one was preparing. The sheriff saw four horses grazing along the creek, including John Brownlee's sorrel. Then he saw Lowry Crown's black farther on.

Sight of the black horse brought his mind back to the deputy, caused him to make a further search that brought results. Some distance back from the fire, Crown, with bound hands and feet, lay partially hidden by the underbrush.

How to go about rescuing Crown and capturing the outlaws had old Pike stumped. Four against one was pretty heavy odds, when all four of the bandits were armed. And the deputy couldn't be of any help as long as he remained bound.

IN the end, the sheriff decided on a bold move. Quietly he slipped back to the tunnel, removed his rifle from the scabbard and returned. Careful as a stalking Navajo, he wedged the rifle between two rocks so that its muzzle covered the group. Then, inch by inch, he began working down the slope toward the fire.

Circumstances favored him at this point. The outlaw acting as cook, who seemed hardly more than a boy, had lifted a frying-pan and coffeepot from the fire. His older and hard-faced companions, gathering about the fire, made noise enough to cover the sheriff's stealthy approach.

Cautiously old Pike worked closer until he reached a boulder within ten feet of the fire. He caught the outlaws flat-footed, each with a plate of food and cup of coffee in his hand, when he quietly arose from

behind the boulder with his gun in his right hand and a quiet smile on his face.

"Howdy, boys," he said casually. "Just get yore hands above your heads, and then get to yore feet. I reckon you savvy we've got you covered plenty."

SO complete was the surprise that the men sat spellbound for an instant. Only their eyes moved, and these, following the sheriff's glance up the slope, encountered a gleaming rifle barrel. Three of them even set their food down before they arose.

Old Pike knew his life hung in the balance during the next few seconds. If two or more of them went for their guns at once, he was a goner. But he had banked on their complete surprise, and his unconcerned manner bore out his bluff.

Keeping to one side of the group, as if to be out of range of a fusillade from a posse, the sheriff made them line up, facing away from him and the rifle on the hillside. Deftly he removed their guns, tossing these behind him.

Bidding the nearest two outlaws drop their arms, he handcuffed their right and left wrists together, and the second man was in turn handcuffed to a third. The fourth outlaw—youngest of the gang—seemed greatly frightened. The sheriff, noting this, and having only two pairs of handcuffs, casually remarked:

"You don't look like such a bad feller, son. Maybe you're just a boy who's got into bad company. I'll let you help me by cutting my deputy loose while I keep an eye on yore pardners here."

The youth had stepped forward, rather eagerly, when a new sound caused the sheriff to stiffen. From up the slope, in the direction of the tunnel, had come the rattle of pebbles. As the sheriff quickly shifted his position he caught a glimpse of a white hat.

Instantly old Pike took in the situation. Someone had followed him from town that morning. The owner of the white hat must be in league with the outlaws to have known about that tunnel entrance. And since he had seen the paint horse in the cave, his cautious approach meant grave danger to the sheriff.

Again there was a point in old Pike's favor. The outlaws, believing he had a posse, would conclude any noise on the slope came from the posse. But the sheriff had to trap the newcomer and prove he was in alliance with outlaws.

He ordered the three handcuffed men to resume their places by the fire, then picked up one of the captured revolvers. He snapped open the breech and ejected the cartridges, then passed it, butt forward, to the young outlaw as he said:

"Watch your step, now, son, and you'll maybe win yoreself probation. Hold this gun on me, just like it was loaded, and you was guardin' my deputy and me."

THE youth, puzzled, took the gun, and old Pike squatted down beside Crown, whose bonds had already been cut. He didn't have time to get another gun for the deputy.

An instant later a man's face—Crowley Wade's—appeared around the edge of a boulder. He hesitated an instant, taking in the situation, then stepped boldly into view. There was a sarcastic smile on his dark face as he remarked to the outlaws:

"Looks like you've got them both. I rode like the devil out here to warn you, after I found out what old Pike meant to do."

"Look out, Wade! The sheriff's got us!" one of the handcuffed men suddenly shouted.

Wade's flabby mouth came open and he stopped suddenly. He started

to reach for his gun. But he was out in the open now, a fair target and within easy range.

"Better drop it, Wade," old Pike cautioned tersely, rising to his feet with a leveled six-gun.

Crown, free of his bonds, wriggled out from the underbrush and caught up one of the captured guns. He stepped over beside the sheriff as he remarked:

"Thank God, you got here, Pike. These fellows captured me last night, after Crowley Wade rode out to warn 'em I was here. I guess they'd a had to bump me off, because they knew I couldn't help but know Wade was the ringleader of this gang. He was having them pull these robberies just before election so he could become sheriff, after which they'd a had things their own way."

"I figgered it that away, after I recognized that white hat of his," the sheriff replied. "And I reckon this young feller here will maybe tell us some more about the gang, since I'm aimin' to help him get probation instead of goin' to the pen."

Crown, digging a pair of handcuffs from his own pocket, fastened them on Wade's wrists. But as old Pike and the deputy started toward the tunnel with their prisoners, Crown remarked:

"That was cute work, Sheriff, makin' Wade think you were captured, so he'd expose his hand. But there's something I don't understand yet. How the devil did you find your way in here?"

"Just plain, everyday horse sense, Lowry. In this case, by using the sense of a crippled paint horse I had Doc Learmonth save," old Pike answered. And there was a satisfied note in his voice because that paint horse had solved both the problems of the Chalk Cliffs gang and his reelection.

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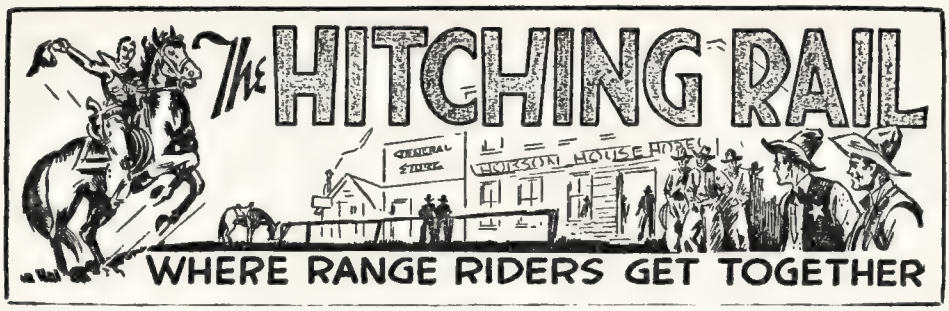
IN OUR COMPANION AIR MAGAZINE

SKY FIGHTERS

10c AT ALL STANDS PUBLISHED MONTHLY



WELL, folks an' everybody, seems like summer's done slipped by durned fast, don't it? Soon we'll be luggin' out our sheep-lined coats an' huntin' fer our overshoes. An' saddlin' up broncs what's jest waitin' tuh pitch high, wide an' han'some, backs all hunched up ready tuh rip loose soon's we throws our laig over th' cantle. Life's thataway, I reckon, an' we gotta smile. A bronc on a cold mawnin' is shore active, loves tuh bust in two soon's yuh hits th' saddle. Don't I know!

Yuh know, fellas an' gals, I been sittin' yere on my haunches achewin' my eyebrows an' lookin' over all them fine illustrated hum-dingers o' real western *hombres* what's made cow country history. Jest think what our boss's give us so fur—Billy th' Kid in our February number, then, follerin' on, The Apache Kid, Bat Masterson, Wild Bill Hickok, Jesse James, Cole Younger; and a heap of real hell fer leather Western yarns in pictures tuh come. Say, pals, ain't that givin' yuh all real honest-tuh-Gawd, top-notch stuff? I'll tell th' world!

Hope yo're all akeepin' yore copies, for time'll shore romp around when some of us'll git argufyin' 'round our *Range Riders' Club's* corrals, come long evenin's, an' then we'll want tuh talk all them pictures over a heap. Git a bunch o' *Range Riders* talkin' thataway an' ain't never no sleep fer nobody.

Watta Swap Colyum!

An' say, didjuh see how our swap colyum's got better an' better every issue? Folks, ef yuh ain't been doin' no swappin', chance THRILLING WESTERN has been givin' yuh, git busy. All sorts o' things. Looks like some fella or gal'll soon be wantin' tuh swap a yaller rooster what sings fer a bronc what takes his whisky straight an' shimmies. Some broncs does.

Now, there was that ornery sorrel bronc what— Sorry folks, but th' boss's broke my yarn off an' says tuh git stopped o' all this slobberin' an' SAY SOMETHIN'.

Well, le's see. Letters a mile high. First one's from Johnny Black, o' St. Louie. Johnny, yuh writes fair tuh middlin' but yuh fergit tuh cross yore "T's"—looks like yuh run outa ink, but it's all *bueno* with me, pard. Yore meanin's plain, an' thanks fer yore photygraf. Some boy, Johnny—heap tall an' wide crost th' shoulders. Light brown hair, too. Girls, yuh'd shore fall fer that Range Rider, *pronto*. Johnny asks 'bout old Chief Washakie, an' if he was give a real military funeral.

He shore was, son, with all th' trimmin's. Chief Washakie bossed his Shoshone tribe fer most seventy years, longer'n any other ruler I ever heerd tell of. Up Wyomin' way, in th' Wind River Mountains, where I been a heap. An' he never fought ag'in th' whites. Th' Army named Fort Washakie, Wyomin', after him, and, when he died, give 'im a swell military funeral an' buried 'im at th' fort—which still stands with its wooden stockade and loopholes. Only Injun what ever was give such a funeral by our gov'ment. A great chief, old Washakie.

Jim Baker, Scout

An' now, folks, meet up with Miss Jessie Bonner o' North Dakota. 'Fraid yo're gonna be snowed in right soon, Jessie. Thanks fer sayin' all them nice things 'bout THRILLING WESTERN. Shore glad yuh've joined us *Range Riders* too. Any gal what smiles like you do, jedgin' from yore picture, gits our best welcome. So yuh wants tuh know somethin' 'bout old Jim Baker, th' scout, Injun fighter, Overland stage guard an' frontiersman. What yore grandfather's been tellin' yuh 'bout him is okay.

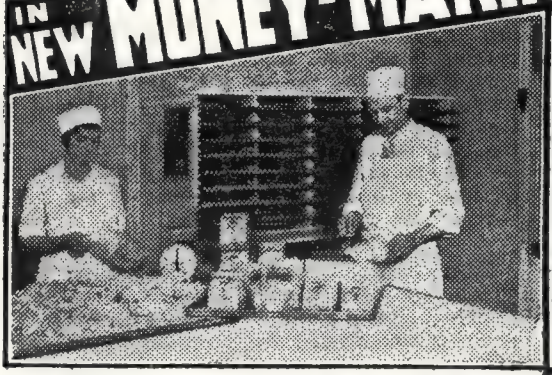
Ef yuh ever gits to th' Cheyenne Frontier Days Rodeo, Jessie, yuh'll be able to sit right down in Jim's real log cabin, for it's there tuh stay. He built that loopholed cabin on th' Snake River, Wyomin', clost tuh Dixon, an', with his Injun wife an' kids, lived there through wild Injun times.

Some years ago, th' cabin, a big, heavy one, with a sorta tower, was taken tuh Cheyenne Rodeo grounds, an' there it stands, historic, bullet and arrow-pocked. Jim headed west when he was jest a kid,

(Continued on page 122)

$64.00 CLEARED IN ONE DAY IN NEW MONEY-MAKING BUSINESS

by H.B.CROSS



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FROM OUR SANCTUM

¶ The October issues of our companion magazines are filled to the brim with the best novels, novelettes, stories and features to be found anywhere.

¶ Thrill to the exploits of Richard Curtis Van Loan, world's greatest sleuth, in MERCHANT OF MURDER—a great full book-length novel by ROBERT WALLACE in the October issue of THE PHANTOM DETECTIVE. Other Crime stories. 10c.

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¶ Arthur J. Burks, George Bruce, Lieut. Frank Johnson, Owen Atkinson, Harold F. Cruickshank and many others make the October SKY FIGHTERS a book crowded from the first page to the last with exciting war-air novels, stories and features. Zooming thrills! 10c.

¶ Detective fans will thrill to THE MURDER TRAP, Johnston McCulley's great book-length novel in THRILLING DETECTIVE, 10c. Also Edward Parrish Ware, A. T. Locke, Margie Harris and others with knockout yarns.

¶ HILLS OF ROMANCE, by L. P. Holmes, a complete novel, is featured in THRILLING RANCH STORIES. A great, big 15c book chock-full of thrills!

¶ Sis and mom will love THRILLING LOVE —10c per copy. Bring one home for them!

—THE PUBLISHER.

(Continued from page 120)

back in 1835, and spent forty years among th' Injuns an' frontiersmen o' his day, winnin' high fame fer bravery.

He was associated, for awhile, with Jim Bridger, who ran th' American Fur Company in Wyomin'. An' he knowed Chief Washakie, what I told about in answerin' Johnny Black's letter above. After long Injun years, Jim Baker discovered his lost brother, sick in an Injun camp, an' they pardnered up, went intuh th' cattle business, won success and fame, an' Jim's picture's in a lot o' Wyomin's public buildings, honored fer makin' Wyomin' history like he done. One time, he rode a hundred an' sixty miles (on one hoss), with a coupla other cowpokes, an' carried a message fer troops what was needed bad.

Desert Growths

Miss Charline Heaton, o' Oakland, California—kin yuh smell th' flowers an' roses, folks?—writes a plum' nice hand, easy tuh read, an' wants tuh know 'bout our desert growths. Charline, they's so durned many. But I'll name a few. Our cow country ain't all jest sand an' blazin' sun an' tarantulas an' horned toads—no, *sir!* We got *real* flowers, heaps of 'em, an' also them desert growths yuh asks about, askin' ef it's true some helps riders o' th' desert.

They shore does, Charline. I'll answer by tellin' yuh a little story. Some years ago a gang o' outlaws vanished inside a rock-ribbed valley what had only one entrance an' that so narrow only one rider could enter at a time. The sheriff's posse dared not try to enter in that way, so they camped outside; and days passed, hopin' tuh starve them outlaws out or make 'em yell fer water. But, nuthin' doin'.

The "Water Barrel"

Finally, th' posse entered, tuh find th' outlaws gone, an' they found that them outlaws had been livin' on what we calls th' "Desert water barrel," gittin' both food an' drink from that plant, which abounds in southern New Mexico an' in Arizona. It's shaped like a barrel an' 'bout as large, stands on end an' is green, with corrugated sides and heavy, sharp spikes all over it. A match'll burn off th' spikes instantly. Then yuh cuts off th' top o' th' barrel. Inside is white pulp, which a fella kin eat; an' by squeezin' th' pulp, yuh gits water yuh kin drink. Fella kin live fer days thataway.

An' that's what them outlaws did, like Injuns an' other white men has done fer ages. I've et it myself, an' drunk th' water, an' it ain't bad a-tall—fer a little while. But it's saved many a life in th' desert.

Then they's prickly pears, what grows in

(Continued on page 124)

THE "SWAP" COLUMN

Here's where you can exchange something you have but don't want for something someone else has that you do want. This is a FREE service.

For example, if you have a camera and don't use it, and would like to have a stamp album, write: "Have Eastman camera, No. 1, Jr., make, 3 years old, good condition, will exchange for stamp album with 3,000 stamps, 25 countries.—John Smith, 49 Park Street, Albany, N. Y."

Limit your request to 25 words. No goods for sale listed, nor requests concerning firearms or any illegal articles.

Type or hand-print clearly, in submitting announcements. THRILLING WESTERN will not be responsible for losses sustained. Make very plain just what you have and just what you want to "swap" it for. Enclose a clipping of this announcement with your request.

Have real cowboy stuff, musical instruments, portable Corona, bound fiction books. Want printing press, good sleeping bag, shop tools. B. P. Kunkler, Winslow, Wash.

Have ten volumes rare 1868 Chambers encyclopedia valued at fifty dollars. Want typewriter, printing press, or— John Kapsak, Sellersville, Pa.

Offer large auditorium size guitar and case, new or ivory and ebony piccolo perfect condition for a B-flat Boehm System clarinet. A. T. Wheeless, Kent, Ill.

Have a six-string guitar and old Italian violin in good condition. Will exchange for B-flat metal or wood clarinet. Gene Mardone, 2612 Foster Avenue, Baltimore, Md.

Will give U. S. higher values, current stamps, for precancel mixture. 100 for 100. Sam Palladino, 236 Winston Street, Los Angeles, Calif.

Swap ukelele in very good shape for one-quarter or one-third electric motor. William Lawler, Sherman Station, Me.

Will swap foreign stamps for U. S. stamps, Indian head pennies, post marks, old envelopes (must still have stamp on) or what have you? D. Bennett, 624 Bond Avenue, Barnesville, Ohio.

Have stamps, books, courses and arrow heads to trade for old U. S. coins and bills. Send stamp for complete list. H. R. Jones, Box 403, Limon, Colorado.

Will swap books for other books. Send list. Kendall Rhodes, Jackson County, Coalton, Ohio.

Will trade one lost U. S. and foreign stamps all different, for four mind Mother's Day or Maryland stamps. Emmett Onesenberry, Hiwassee, Va.

Movie fans, will exchange photos of movie stars. Have hundreds. Trade for your favorites. Have list. M, J. Hellenack, 115 W. Clark Street, Ilion, New York.

Will trade choice stamps and chemical glassware for one tube radio, low power microscope, or telescope. All letters answered. Theodore Gatkin, 1553 Bryant Avenue, N. Y.

Have French book full course, few stamps, books. Want Oriental, Indian curios, Spanish full course books. E. Fonda 41-12 78 Street, Jackson Heights, Long Island.

Have radio television course good as new. Trade for anything. What have you? E. T. Caudill, 2117 Spruce Avenue, Springfield, Mo.

Have cornet, will trade for guitar, accordian, typewriter, radio, or? What have you? Reuben Flesner, Milroy, Minn.

(More "Swaps" on page 125)

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30x5.00-20		2.85	1.05
28x5.25-18		2.90	1.15
29x5.25-19		2.95	1.15
30x5.25-20		2.95	1.15
31x5.25-21		3.25	1.15
28x5.50-18		3.25	1.15
29x5.50-19		3.35	1.15
30x5.00-18		3.40	1.15
31x5.00-19		3.40	1.15
32x6.00-20		3.45	1.25
33x6.00-21		3.65	1.35
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33x4	2.95	.95
34x4	3.25	.95
33x4½	3.35	1.15
32x4½	3.45	1.15
34x4½	3.45	1.15
30x5	3.65	1.25
33x5	3.75	1.45
35x5	3.95	1.45

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(Continued from page 122)

big clumps, like green dinner plates stuck together along their edges, all green an' covered with sharp spines. Some ranches keep machines they use tuh burn off th' spines, when cattle'll tromp th' plants down an' eat 'em.

An' in Arizona they's th' giant cactus, twenty feet high, green, corrugated sides and th' same sharp spikes all over th' round sides, trunks a foot or two thick, an' with big arms stickin' out like they was humans. Called "suhuara." Cut off th' top, after choppin' one down, an' yuh'll find th' same milky water like in th' desert water barrel, fit tuh drink. Birds peck holes in th' sides an' drink th' water, an' we cowmen figger anything a bird kin drink, we can.

Th' Spanish Bayonet

Then we have th' "Yucca" or Spanish Bayonet, mostly used as firewood. Pretty when in bloom. An' th' "Ocatilla" or devil's walkin' stick (as we riders calls it) what's used fer fences an' th' like.

An', 'course, they's heaps o' mesquite an' grease wood everywheres in th' Southwest. Never seen mesquite up in th' North country, an' they's very little sagebrush down in th' Southwest; that's mostly a North country growth.

They's lots more, Charline, but I gotta stop. Don't fergit, though, that outa certain kinds o' cactus candy is made, an' tastes fine.

A Real Fella

An' now comes Jimmy Wales, a real fella. Talks straight out an' writes a stout hand. Mails his letter from Omaha, but says he's "travelin'," but don't say where to. Keep goin', Jimmy, an' drop us a line now an' then.

Yuh shore must have swell hoofs, ef yo're aimin' tuh make Arizona thataway. But looks like yo're headin' fer th' hoss country, where walkin' ain't none popular. Jimmy wants tuh know 'bout pack trains.

Pack Trains

Each one usually has 'bout fifty pack-mules, Jimmy, 'bout fourteen-and-a-half hands high an' stout in their laigs. Then they's usually fourteen packers, what rides saddle mules. An' a bell-mare (a hoss), what wears a neck-bell an' leads th' packs, onct they're trained right. I've shore rode a heap with pack trains, son, an' it's fine in good weather an' with good-broke mules.

Otherwise, come snowy weather an' a cold wind an' green mules, froze ropes an' hardened aparejos (Spanish pack-saddles), an' a fella jest nach'lly talks right out, gittin' more'n more expert in cussin'.

Each mule'll carry a load of 'bout two

(Continued on page 126)

MORE "SWAPS"

(See page 123)

Have bead loom and beads, book on magic and boxing, gyroscope and pedestal, complete standard telegraph set, radio mike, 5-foot bow and arrows. Want set of four boxing gloves. John Bell, High Street, Closter, New Jersey.

Have opals, gem stones, old photos of west, coins, rare stamps, bills, minerals, curios, spears, arrowheads. Want curios, minerals, relics, books, stamps. Vernon Lemley, Northbranch, Kansas.

Have violin in good condition, will trade for mandolin. Have stamps, will trade for same. Johnnie Middaugh, 1213 N. Maple, Jackson, Mich.

Have trombone, uke in excellent condition. Want saxophone. W. F. McWilliams, Box 8, Bloom, Colorado.

Have sign painters letter patterns, oil paintings, tattoo supplies. Want binoculars, musical instruments, relics, or what have you? John Haynes, Doe Run, Missouri.

Trade tattooing outfit; U. S. large copper cents, two- and three-cent pieces, other coins. Want offers, portable typewriter, curios. Miller, 433 Main Street, Norfolk, Va.

Will exchange small victrola for typewriter in good condition. Walter Leach, Box 283, Armada, Mich.

Will swap book of knowledge, 20 volumes, for what have you. Prefer jewelry. L. J. Louis, Box 715, East Northport, N. Y.

Swap practically new vest pocket camera, and one roll of film, for what? Walker, 802½—27th Street, Moline, Ill.

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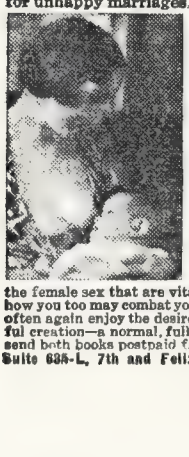

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(Continued from page 124)

hundred to three hundred pounds, an' a pack train oughta cover from twenty-five tuh thirty miles a day, good weather, up hill an' down. On each mule we puts two "side-packs"—each, say, a sack o' oats—an' ties 'em together with what we calls th' "sling rope." On top o' th' side packs we places what we calls th' "top-pack," a little lighter in weight.

Then we uses th' "lash rope" tuh throw th' "diamond hitch," which, onct learned, ain't never forgot. Two men usually pack each mule, one workin' on one side an' th' other on th' other. Two good packers oughta pack a quiet mule in less'n forty seconds, if expert. I seen one pack outfit what packed out its whole fifty mules, each with two side packs, using th' fourteen packers, in two minutes and thirty-two seconds flat. Any man what needs a full minute tuh work his side of a pack-mule jest don't belong.

It Ain't No Lady's Job

Ef yo're thinkin' o' joinin' up with a pack outfit, Jimmy, better git in good, hard physical shape. It ain't no lady's job. Imagine yoreself standin' on th' downhill side of a pack-mule on a mountain side, when it's snowin' like all gitout an' th' ground's wet an' slippery an' yo're cold as the devil an' each finger's stiff an' yo're liftin' a hundred pounds or more from ground tuh mule's back, holdin' it there while you an' yore pal throws th' diamond hitch, other pack-mules jammin' past, men a-cussin' an' yore mule standin' on yore foot, an' it's gittin' dark an' they's ten miles more tuh go.

They's other packs, Jimmy, like usin' leather boxes fer side packs, what we calls "panniers." They hang from cross-sticks on th' saddle an' are one-man packs, like prospectors use on their burros. When cowpokes travels alone, they generally use a pack-horse, put their soogans an' clothes inside a big piece of canvas, lay th' whole thing over th' hoss' back an' around th' hoss' sides, an' rope it there tight. But they ain't packin' sacks o' oats, or bales o' hay, or such like. For such packin', th' old Spanish aparejo still holds its place.

Cowgal Dresses fer Ridin'

Only room fer one more letter, folks. Miss Thelma Todd o' Raleigh, North Carolina—say, ain't that a nice place tuh live, everybody? — writes she's dark-haired, brown-eyed an' five feet five, hundred and twenty-five, an' wants tuh know how cowgals dresses fer ridin'. Gotta be brief, Thelma, this time. They wears ridin'

(Concluded on page 128)

THE SECRET OF EASTER ISLAND!

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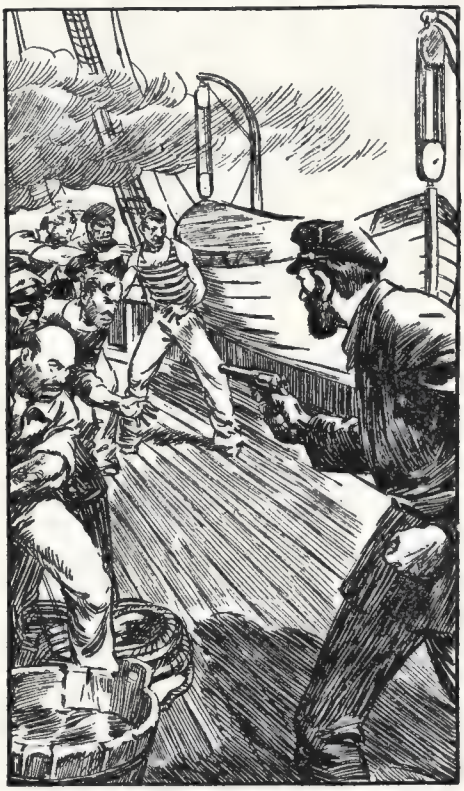

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(Concluded from page 126)

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Chuck Martin, Murray Leinster, Cliff Walters an' other yarn-spinners 'll add t' th' gala fiction round-up in next month's rodeo. An' I'll be seein' yuh again in th' next issue, too!

Well, folks, git lookin' over your red flannels. Gonna be chilly soon. *Salud y pesetas, amigos!*

Buck Benson

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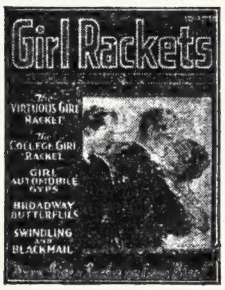

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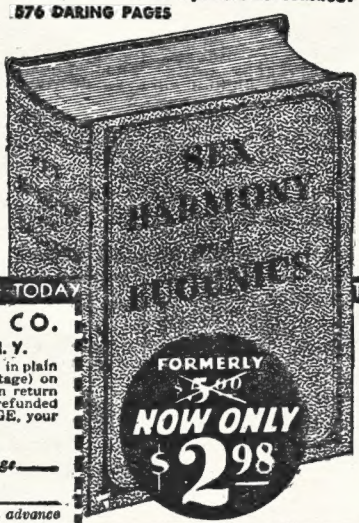

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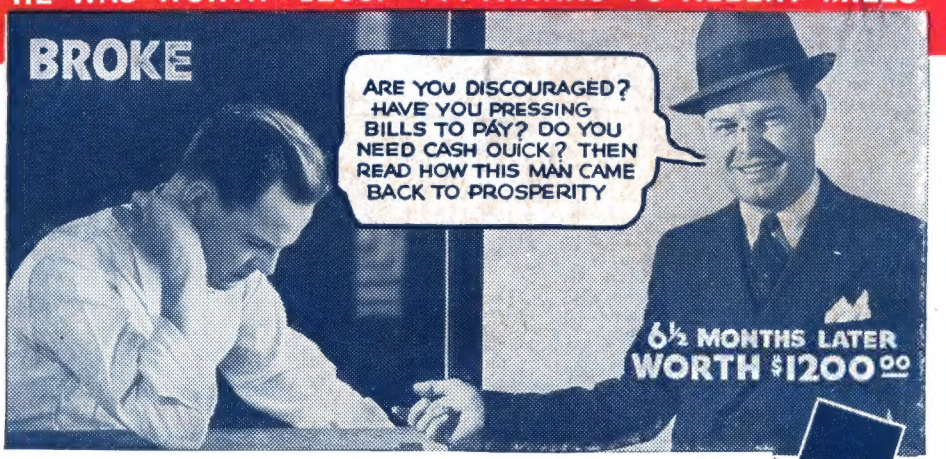

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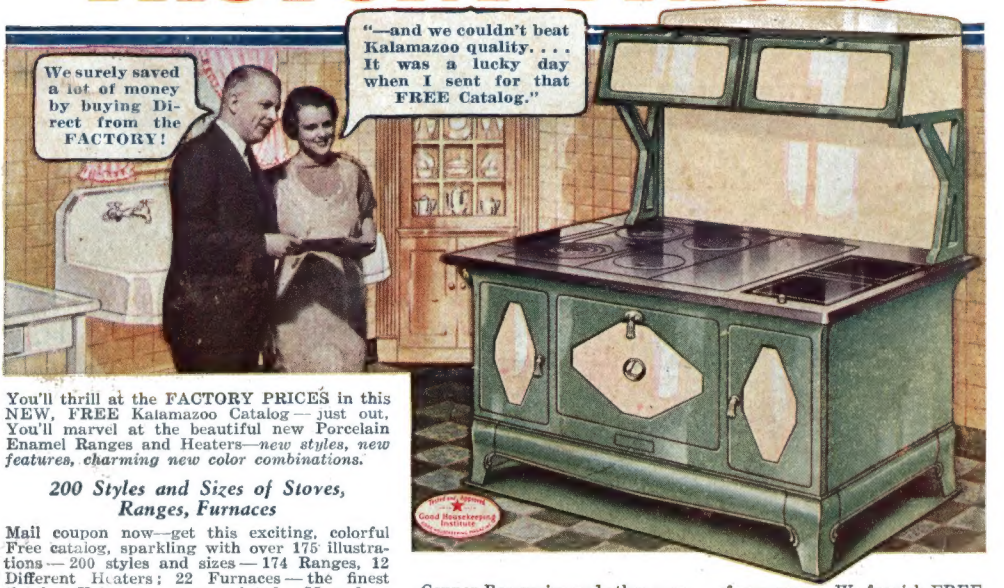

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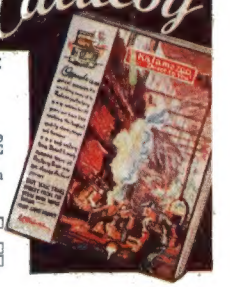

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